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**"The half-breed, the half-dead"**

**Blood-Mixing, Queer Latino Cultural Production, and HIV/AIDS, 1981-1996**

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King's College London

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Blood-Mixing, Queer Latino Cultural  
Production, and HIV/AIDS,  
1981-1996

Victoria Elizabeth Carroll  
American Studies PhD  
2014

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*“All died yesterday today and will die again tomorrow.”<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Pedro Pietri, ‘Puerto Rican Obituary’ [1973], *The Outlaw Bible of American Poetry*, ed. Alan Kaufman (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1999), 175.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to begin by giving my most sincere thanks to Professor John Howard. His advice, support, and humour have been invaluable, invigorating, and very much appreciated. Thank you to Dr. Lara Shalson, who has performed many roles with great diligence, and Dr. Fiona Anderson, sounding board, ally, and friend. I am happy to be Alice to your Gertrude. Throughout my PhD, Queer@King's has been my home and intellectual hub; thank you to all its participants and to the people who keep it going, particularly Professor Mark Turner, Dr. Bob Mills, and Dr. Hector Kollias. I would like to give special thanks to the "Johnites," Jay Watkins, Skyler Hijazi, and Tomek Mossakowski, for The Retro Bar reading sessions and the sympathetic ears. To my good friends Jenny Essen and Sophie Lally, thanks for getting me through.

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That summer I was lucky enough to take part in the International Visitor Leadership Program on HIV/AIDS Awareness and LGBT Advocacy. In the three weeks I was touring the U.S. I not only met some incredible people (and enduring friends) from across Europe, I was also privileged to witness the phenomenal work carried out by charities, NGOs, clinics, doctors, journalists, social workers, outreach programmes, and dedicated individuals on behalf of LGBT welfare and HIV/AIDS prevention advocacy. A special thanks goes to John and Sherry Joyce from Little Rock, Arkansas, for their hospitality and fantastic "down home" cooking. I am most grateful for the nights spent in gay bars and clubs, talking to people (especially young gay men of colour) about their experiences with HIV and AIDS. As I sit at my keyboard I never want to forget that HIV/AIDS is a reality from which none of us are immune.

Being a part of the IVLP allowed me to attend the 19<sup>th</sup> International AIDS Conference, held in America for the first time in 22 years. At such a huge event it is the smaller things that will stay with me – the personal stories, the march to the White House, and the panels of the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt displayed in the main hall. Watching the revival of Larry Kramer's 1985 play *The Normal Heart* was also truly unforgettable. I would like to give a big thank you to Cara Rodway for all her help and for wangling me an invite to the British Embassy in Washington D.C.

Whilst the IVLP was a supreme highlight I have fond memories of all of the conferences I have taken part in. In particular, I will remember the 'Queer Places, Practices, and Lives' conference at Ohio State University, where I was introduced to some of my queer theory heroes, and the inaugural 'Haciendo Caminos: Mapping the Futures of US Latino/a Literatures' conference at John Jay College in New York. I was initially anxious to share my writing with a community of mostly Latino/a academics, but the general support and enthusiasm was overwhelming. Thank you to Professor Ramón Saldivar, Professor Paula Moya, and Professor Michael Hames-García for their most helpful suggestions, insights, and mostly for their encouragement. I would also like to

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Whilst in New York I attended a public conversation at the New School – 'Time is Not a Line: the Anxiety of Knowing, Forgetting, History and Living' – hosted by Pato Hebert and Ted Kerr. Naively presuming that such an event would supplement my research, and be a pleasant way to fill a Sunday afternoon, I was genuinely amazed and moved by the coming together of veteran activists and young queer people, all willing to share their experiences, stand their ground, and commit to the reinvigoration of AIDS activism in the present. I got the impression that everyone in that room passionately wanted to reignite a dwindling queer movement, and that afternoon it seemed possible. I remember one man saying emotionally that he had been searching for a group like this for years; I fervently hope it has continued. Thank you in particular to group facilitator's Ricardo Montez and Julian de Mayo, two Latino academics doing important and exciting work.

A lack of motivation is very often the scourge of the thesis writing process and for this reason I would like to thank Colin Harrison, who back in 2011 gave me my own Felix Gonzalez-Torres edition print, *Untitled (Death by Gun)*, which has served to inspire me over the last few years. Every time I look at it, I am reminded that my acquisition of it is very much in keeping with Gonzalez-Torres's viral ethos. One day I will pass it on... Maybe!

Lastly, but never least-ly, thank you to my wonderful family, James, Jon, Jordan, Sam, Max and Ayva, to my grandmother Nancy, who has been my perpetual champion, and especially to my parents, Sue and Pete Carroll. Without their love and support none of this would have been thinkable, let alone possible. I would like to thank them for trying to understand my research; watching them attempt to explain this project to bemused friends and strangers alike has been a constant source of entertainment. I can honestly say (despite their protestations) that I am more proud of them than they could ever be of me.

## Abstract

This project examines cultural production by gay Latinos responding to the American HIV/AIDS epidemic from 1981 to the “protease moment” of 1996, when effective medical treatments emerged. Through close readings of a wide but underrepresented range of published and unpublished literature, performance, and visual art, I argue that key groups of cultural producers accentuated blood-mixing both as a marker of Latino racial and cultural identity and as a vector of HIV transmission in this period.

Reading across Chicana feminism (a primary theoretical springboard, I argue, for modern Latino/a studies) and HIV/AIDS scholarship—two discursive contemporaries of 1990s queer theory, rarely discussed in tandem—this thesis evaluates the shaping influence of blood-mixing for Latino hybridity, queer relationality, and viral exchange. This synthesis, which I term “viral mestizaje,” proved a unique nexus for subjects identifying as both Latino and gay in the age of AIDS.

The thesis redresses several imbalances in the scholarship of HIV/AIDS and Latino/a studies in the U.S. As I argue, HIV in the bloodstreams of particular raced sexed bodies suffused cultural narratives in gay Latino communities, thereby troubling notions of racial specificity during an epidemic often labelled a “gay white man’s disease.”

I first examine abjection as an affective mechanism contouring the lived experiences of queer Latinos with HIV/AIDS. I argue that existing narratives of Latinos as racially ambiguous border-crossers paralleled and patterned rhetoric of viral transmission across spatial boundaries to disrupt the coherence of late twentieth-century identities. In the following two chapters, reaching from the East to West Coasts, I analyse the conceptual art of Felix Gonzalez-Torres and the writing of Gil Cuadros to demonstrate and deconstruct dual narratives of assimilation (as both an imperative of American cultural acquisition and a feature of viral reverse transcription) and economies of cross-racial HIV transmission. Finally, I chart the politics of memory and mythology by queer Chicano cultural producers in Los Angeles reading HIV/AIDS through the historical and mythical optics of blood-mixing and its legacies in the borderlands.

# Introduction

## Just like AIDS

In May 2009, René Pérez Joglar (a.k.a. Residente), the Puerto Rican lead singer of Latino urban music group *Calle 13*, accepted the position of International Ambassador for the Latino Commission on AIDS.<sup>1</sup> At the 14<sup>th</sup> annual Cielo Latino gala benefit hosted at Cipriani Wall Street in New York City, he took to the stage to address the largely Latino/a audience armed with a rather intriguing speech:

I was thinking.

In my blood, my friends are my blood, my family is my blood, my father's brother, tio José who died of AIDS, may he rest in peace, is my blood. Titi Rosi, one of my mother's four sisters, is my blood. She was infected by tio Josean, her first love, may he rest in peace. She found out she was HIV positive the day more life came to her life, the day she was going to be a mom. My two cousins, her children, who thank God are negative, are also my blood.

I was thinking.

About the Caribbean, about how "polluted" we supposedly are. *That for some, we are like a plague, just like AIDS.* Because in the Caribbean we have been able to mingle as a people, because we are and have been able to take in all races, all colors.

And I was thinking.

That if I'm Caribbean, that if I am a son and I'm the blood of strong, brave and wonderful women, that I also have "the ovaries," the strength, to dare to be positive to HIV, to dare to get tested, to dare to talk about it openly with my family, with my friends. And I call upon all Latinos to pay tribute to our mothers, and to be positive to AIDS, it's the best way to prevent it, fight it, and to finally find a cure for it.

And I am still thinking.<sup>2</sup>

Between Residente's personal stories of courage and survival and his impassioned call for action resides a kernel of rhetoric which forms the conceptual backbone of this project.

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<sup>1</sup> The Latino Commission on AIDS is a non-profit membership organisation founded in 1990 and focuses upon the impact of HIV/AIDS in Latino communities across the United States of America. Directed by Dennis deLeon until his death in 2009, the Latino Commission is now directed by Guillermo Chacón. See [www.latinoaids.org](http://www.latinoaids.org). Accessed December 17<sup>th</sup> 2013.

<sup>2</sup> 'HUGE: The fight against HIV in Latino communities gets a new ally,' posted May 12<sup>th</sup> 2009: emphasis added. [www.blabbeando.blogspot.co.uk/2009/05/huge-fight-against-hiv-in-latino.html](http://www.blabbeando.blogspot.co.uk/2009/05/huge-fight-against-hiv-in-latino.html). Accessed February 16<sup>th</sup> 2013.



Residente neither asks his audience to consider the similarities between constructions of “the Latino/a” and “HIV/AIDS” in America nor questions whether there is some implicit link between the two; rather, he posits the interrelationality of these terms as self-evident, indexed by the proliferation of discrimination aimed at Latino/a groups in the United States. Taken on its own, the conflation of Latino/a identity and HIV/AIDS is worthy of greater consideration and remains uncharted territory in both the growing field of Latino/a studies and the existing body of HIV/AIDS discourse. However, he moves this analogy a step further, to a conceptual plane brimming with untapped potential; for Residente it is the coalescence of people, forging the hybridisation of racial groups, the interpenetration of cultures, and the mingling of a spectrum of skin colours, a coalescence defined by transgressive sexual contact, which positions Latino/as in an economy of signification and association in which they become defined by and through unrestricted mixture, in which they may become “just like AIDS.”

Why should the blending and blurring of racial categories, which is a marked feature of Latino/a identification in the U.S., chime with narratives of HIV/AIDS? I contend that the answer lies in the observation that racial and cultural ambiguity taps into another area of concern, namely rhetoric of blood-mixing, a most maligned *and* celebrated form of fluid exchange and racial transmission. More than any other conceptual trope, blood-mixing has resonated in twentieth century Latino/a discourse, positioned as central to the construction of Latino/a consciousness, to the political, social, and cultural identity formation of an otherwise diverse group of people, a rallying point for activism, a conceptual link to a repressed and occluded nationalist and indigenous past, an embodied politics and a contested legacy. This narrative intensified with the meteoric rise of Chicana feminism in the 1980s.<sup>3</sup>

Yet as Latino/a academics and cultural producers were reflecting on this sanguineous subject matter, a horrific display of unusual symptoms had begun to emerge amongst already marginalised groups across the country, the injuriously branded “4-H club.”<sup>4</sup> This new disease was labelled Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) in 1982; a year later it was discovered that it resulted from a breakdown in the human immune system triggered by a previously unknown viral agent, the Human

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<sup>3</sup> Chicano/Chicana (sometimes appearing as Xicano/Xicana) are terms which name men and women of Mexican heritage who were born in the U.S. This category of ethnic identity gained currency in the Chicano Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and 70s, and still has political and activist connotations.

<sup>4</sup> Beginning in 1982 groups deemed “high risk” began to be known as the 4-H club. The 4 H’s stood for Homosexual men, Haemophiliacs, Heroin users, and people of Haitian origin. Later, sex workers, or “Hookers,” were added to this group.

Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV).<sup>5</sup> In the wake of this, another startling discovery was made: the virus moved between people via the exchange of infected bodily fluids, through the depositing of semen, the ingestion of breast milk, and the *mixing of blood*.

This thesis engages with the fraught connections between constructions of blood-mixing as both a facilitator of late twentieth century Latino racial and cultural identity and an arbiter of potential contamination, linked to the uninhibited flow of bodily fluids in gay communities in the wake of HIV/AIDS. Coming out of 1960s and 70s grassroots movements for social change – which engendered activist groups such as the Brown Berets and the Puerto Rican Young Lords – Latino/as began to proudly define themselves in relation to narratives of mixed-blood, to suture themselves into lineages that defined blood as a feature of racial identity politics, which had a beleaguered history but which had also been successfully reappropriated by the 1980s. However, after 1981, with the spread of HIV, the mixing of bodily fluids became synonymous with decline and death. Although HIV/AIDS is not, and never has been, an issue that only affects gay men, this thesis focuses exclusively upon this faction, to assess how the iconography of AIDS as concurrently a “gay plague” and a “white man’s disease” has impacted the trajectory of the epidemic for queer Latino communities, communities that often negate Western models of sexual identity and disclosure.<sup>6</sup> As gay Latino human rights lawyer and activist Dennis deLeon remarked at the height of the crisis, “The unspoken rule is that you can exist only as one thing at a time – a Latino or a gay man – with no recognition of reality’s complexity. Add an H.I.V. diagnosis to this mix and it gets complicated.”<sup>7</sup>

Blood-mixing has historically been a significant and ambivalent motif circulating throughout Latin America and the U.S. and remains a rhetorical frame that imbibes narratives of strength and deficiency, evolution and degeneration, narratives which, I argue, became adopted and rejected, coloured and warped by the rise of HIV/AIDS. Identifying as Latino/a meant eschewing cogent (and codifying) definitions of race; it

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<sup>5</sup> Early in 1982, the syndrome was initially known as GRID (Gay-Related Immune Deficiency). Later that year this was changed to AIDS.

<sup>6</sup> See Tomás Almaguer, ‘Chicano Men: A Cartography of Homosexual Identity and Behavior,’ *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993).

In an important account of the sexual lives of Dominican immigrant men in New York City, Carlos Ulises Decena invokes the “*sujeto tácito*” (a feature of Spanish grammar that facilitates first person identification without the presence of “I” through a process of verb conjugation, where the subject does not precede the action but is built into it) to break with reductive models of Foucauldian sexuality which fail to encapsulate the experiences of his informants. See Decena, *Tacit Subjects: Belonging and Same-Sex Desire Among Dominican Immigrant Men* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 19.

<sup>7</sup> Dennis deLeon, ‘My Hopes, My Fears, My Disease,’ *New York Times*, May 15 1993. See <http://www.nytimes.com/1993/05/15/opinion/my-hopes-my-fears-my-disease.html>. Accessed December 16<sup>th</sup> 2013.

bolstered the potential to exist outside of or across the five official categories of race, as mandated by the U.S. Census Bureau.<sup>8</sup> For example, “some other race” was added as a racial denomination in 1980, when this project begins; 95% of the participants who chose this option also identified as Hispanic. Only in 2000 could Americans select more than one racial group. A surge of Latino/a scholarship in this period sought to address this negation, this shroud of invisibility, without capitulating to simplistic identity models; Latino/as embraced ambiguity as emancipatory. It is important to note that not all Latino/as identify as racially “mixed” or coalesce around notions of blood-mixing or racial hybridity; rather I am interested in analysing the discourses that tackle this hybridity, both as a celebration and as a threat. As Chéla Sandoval asserts “mestizo/a,” translated as “mixed,” is not merely an ethnic signifier; it is a “*tactical subjectivity* with the capacity to de- and recenter, given the forms of power to be moved.”<sup>9</sup>

By way of close readings of a wide range of underrepresented cultural production – including novels, short stories, poetry, plays, performance, and visual art – that appeared in the first fifteen years of the epidemic (1981-1996), before antiretroviral therapy (ART) became available, I argue that for specific gay Latino men – straddling the still bifurcated realms of sexuality and race – HIV/AIDS as a blood-borne disorder tapped into, and transformed, existing narratives of blood-mixing as a form of Latino/a racial, cultural, ethnic, and national identity formation. I argue that the presence of HIV inside queer Latino bodies (already buckling under a plethora of inscriptions) impacted upon certain cultural attachments. It was seen by some as a cessation of mixed-blood resilience and by others as a new form of legacy, a continuation of mixed-blood identity through non-heteronormative contact. Some utilised the virus to comment on the position of Latino/as and homosexuals in North America, whilst others wielded it to conceptually break with a discriminatory past and invent new networks of affect. Some likened it to the exclusion of Latino/as in the U.S., whilst others viewed it as another way for the body to be radically displaced, to be in diaspora. I am not suggesting homogeneity across experience, across ethnic groupings or geopolitical space. I *am* suggesting that blood as a quasi-metaphorical substance of racial identity *and* queer(ed) sexual identity did saturate cultural production by gay Latinos responding to HIV/AIDS in the first fifteen years of the epidemic.

The ambiguous positioning of Latinos in relation to race and space forms the impetus for Chapter One. Building upon a model of abjection deployed in Julia Kristeva’s

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<sup>8</sup> At this time the five official racial categories were White, Black/African-American, Asian, Native American, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander.

<sup>9</sup> Chéla Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 59: emphasis added.

1981 monograph *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, and developed by prominent gay Puerto Rican theatre critic Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez, I argue that similar mechanisms of revulsion and expulsion function to contour affective responses to both Latino identity and HIV/AIDS in the U.S. This conflation has occurred, I contend, because both of these positions are linked through notions of transgression, whether the transgression of spatial boundaries or of compartmentalising identity politics centred on clearly defined racial categories. I (re)appropriate “brown” as a seminal term denoting the oppositionality and ambiguity contouring Latino/a consciousness in the U.S., a term indexing a complex history of racial impurity and contamination, a term recalibrated under the effects of the AIDS epidemic.

In Chapter Two I explore assimilation as a paradigm that haunts narratives of Latino belonging and rhetoric of viral incorporation in this period. Cuban-American conceptual artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres, hailed as a leading light of the New York art world of the late 80s and early 90s, developed artwork that strategically mimicked the assimilation of HIV into the cells of the host, and its subsequent reproduction and proliferation, to subtly comment on the position of the queer immigrant in the late twentieth century American body politic. Motivated by the death of his partner from AIDS, Gonzalez-Torres began producing fluctuating sculptures, depleted by the work’s spectators, replenished daily by the artist. Billboards encoding the devastating impact of the epidemic loomed over New York. Industrial clocks indexed the asymmetrical winding down of queer lovers. Through close consideration of these pieces, and what Josh Takano Chambers-Letson has dubbed a “viral strategy” of artistic distribution, I argue that Gonzalez-Torres explored displacement and (re)territorialisation as realities dictating his self-actualisation as a Cuban emigrant and a gay man with AIDS.

The works of gay Mexican-American writer Gil Cuadros are the subject of Chapter Three. A rising star of the Los Angeles literary scene until his premature death from AIDS in 1996, Cuadros wrote passionately about his experiences as a gay Latino with AIDS, struggling with an abusive, homophobic family, and negotiating his desire for (and alienation from) the white men he cruised in West Hollywood. Through close readings of Cuadros’s sole collection of quasi-autobiographical short stories and poetry *City of God* (1994), plus a scattering of published stories and a collaboration with Puerto Rican artist and activist Cory Roberts-Auli, I argue that Cuadros fashioned moments of racial materialisation and disintegration which he imagined as a consequence of his encounters with white men, a process I have termed “viral miscegenation.” Engaging with blood as a substance of kinship, be it biological or viral, and community, be it ethnic, societal, or

religious, I assert that Cuadros utilised HIV to sever the bloodlines suturing him to his family and ambivalently rendered cultural attachments, whilst simultaneously imagining the virus as productive matter, constructing affective (and fetishistic) ties with his white lovers.

Finally, I contend that in the opening decades of the epidemic gay Latino cultural producers adopted and extended the already prevalent mythicisation of HIV/AIDS, constructing alternative narratives which refashioned the epidemic from within a specific ethnic and cultural purview, stitching personal experiences into the myths, traditions, and histories of Latino/a communities. In Chapter Four I chart the efforts of gay Chicanos to wrestle representations of the epidemic from the dangerous malaise of mainstream cultural amnesia, to reclaim agency through the re-narration of HIV/AIDS as a disease entangled in Chicano struggles for self-actualisation in Los Angeles. From disrupted myths of heightened mestizo immunity, to the reformulation of ancient Aztec homosociality, to the political audacity of the Chicano youth movement, to the rise of AIDS activism, this chapter positions HIV/AIDS as a continuation of other forms of cultural oppression (and resistance) proliferating in the Southwest borderlands.

In the following four sections of this Introduction, I will set up my methodology, my unique discursive intervention, a definition of key terms, and finally the historical situ of this project. I begin by exploring two areas of scholarship, HIV/AIDS discourse and Chicana feminism, which both came to prominence at the same moment, which, in different ways laid the foundation for the explosion of queer theory in the 1990s, and which have, I contend, rarely been read together. I follow this with a discussion of the relatedness of bodies at the end of the twentieth century, a relatedness spawned from both cultural readings of Latino/a hybridity and the generative exchange of viral “substance” prevalent in HIV transmission, a phenomenon I have termed “viral mestizaje.” The conflation of viral and mestizaje not only rethinks heteronormative imperatives rooted in more mainstream renderings of Latino/a multiplicity, it also colours the infrastructures of queer affect constructed by the sharing of infected bodily fluids, highlighting the significance of racial identity and the negation of cultural and historical affective economies. In the last two sections I defend the terms adopted in this thesis and situate my entire argument in a historical context, excavating the significance of the years 1981-1996, the time before antiretroviral therapy transformed the landscape of queer culture.

## Sanguineous Allies

1981 was a significant year. The first cases of AIDS were identified amongst gay men in urban centres across North America whilst Chicana lesbian feminists Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa co-edited the hugely successful and influential anthology, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. Dubbed a “catalyst for coalitions” by contributor Barbara Smith,<sup>10</sup> this collection facilitated the explosion of Chicana feminism in the academy, opening up the potential for intersectional discourse forged in the merging of race, ethnicity, gender, class, and sexuality. Framed against the developing discursive and political resistance of the late twentieth century, *Bridge* solidified the intense connectivity of women of colour cultural production with wider tropes of political activism and academic scholarship. In the decade that followed, a plethora of edited anthologies by women of colour would irrevocably cement and extend this radical traversal of identity categorisations in the U.S.<sup>11</sup>

1987 was another key year. From the peripheries of the U.S.-Mexico border Anzaldúa penned the groundbreaking *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, a manifesto for the mestiza, a brown(ed) historiography of the Southwest frontier. The transgressors live here, she writes, “the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half-dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the normal.”<sup>12</sup> The half-breed and the half-dead. What can we take from this juxtaposition? What does it mean to embody both of these troubling categories in 1980s America? For me, it is significant that *Borderlands*, a treatise on Latino/a exclusion and inequality in the U.S., was published the same year that azidothymidine (AZT), the first approved HIV drug, hit the market; the year that the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt, conceived of by long-time gay activist Cleve Jones, was unfurled for the first time on the National Mall in Washington D.C. whilst half a million people looked on; the year that the activist group ACT UP (the AIDS Coalition

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<sup>10</sup> Barbara Smith, *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983), xlv.

<sup>11</sup> See *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave*, ed. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith (New York: The Feminist Press, 1982); *Cuentos: Stories by Latinas*, ed. Mariana Roma-Carmona, Alma Gómez, and Cherríe Moraga (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983); *Compañeras: Latina Lesbians*, ed. Juanita Ramos (New York: Latina Lesbian History Project, 1987); *Third Woman: The Sexuality of Latinas*, ed. Norma Alarcón, Ana Castillo, and Cherríe Moraga (Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 1989); *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1990); *Chicana Lesbians: The Girls Our Mothers Warned Us About*, ed. Carla Trujillo (Berkeley: Third Women Press, 1991).

<sup>12</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* [1987], third edition (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2007), 25.

To Unleash Power) first took to the streets of New York demanding an end to the crisis, an end to the devastating apathy of Ronald Reagan's administration; the year that immigration legislation performed a crackdown on HIV-positive people entering the U.S., an embargo that was only repealed by Barack Obama twenty three years later.

This thesis excavates the interplay of these two seemingly disparate fields – Chicana feminist critique and HIV/AIDS discourse – that garnered academic interest in the 1980s, two discursive spheres that enabled queer theory and activism in this period. Yet these fields of intellectual inquiry have rarely been discussed in tandem; indeed, there has been no significant acknowledgment that these contemporaneous discourses have had anything, or could have anything, to say to each other. One of the primary aims of this project is to read these discourses together to make connections, to devise new ways of viewing blood-mixing for those cultural producers who identify as both Latino and gay in the age of AIDS. Chicana feminism provides the ideal lens through which to read HIV/AIDS for if, as Evelyn Hammonds insists, “only a multi-faceted [...] analysis attentive to issues of race, sex, gender, and power can adequately expose the impact of AIDS,”<sup>13</sup> this brand of feminism, much like the virus itself, functions, in the words of Chéla Sandoval, “as a working chiasmus (a mobile crossing) between races, genders, sexes, cultures, languages, and nations.”<sup>14</sup>

But how can a discourse that galvanised blood-mixing as a central tenet of Latino/a identity (monumentalising miscegenation as a celebrated facilitator of resilient, hybrid beings), be reconciled with the unrestricted mixing of contaminated bodily fluids, an anxiety reactivated in the wake of HIV/AIDS? Care must be taken to eschew analysis that further entrenches the tacit assumption that unprotected heterosexual sex is productive, healthy, and life-affirming whilst unprotected homosexual sex is destructive, dirty, and life-debasing; as the controversial HIV-positive writer, advocate, and gay porn star Scott O'Hara insists, “sex is good. Not ‘some sex is good.’ SEX, in and of itself, is good, positive, life-affirming, joyful, ecstatic, beneficial.”<sup>15</sup> How can a disease invested in the rescripting of genetic code and the dissolution of internal boundaries be rethought through a Chicana feminist lens, a lens constructed in relation to psychological, sexual, and

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<sup>13</sup> Evelyn Hammonds, ‘Missing Persons: African American Women, AIDS and the History of Disease,’ *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: Norton, 1995), 447.

<sup>14</sup> Chéla Sandoval, ‘Mestizaje as Method: Feminists-of-Color Challenge the Canon,’ *Living Chicana Theory*, ed. Carla Trujillo (Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 1998), 352.

<sup>15</sup> Scott O'Hara, ‘Talking with my Mouth Full,’ *Policing Public Sex: Queer Politics and the Future of AIDS Activism*, ed. Dangerous Bedfellows et al. (Boston: South End Press, 1996), 86.

material borderlands (the site of shifting, fragmented identities), devoted to the (re)materialisation of the brown(ed) body?

Mining the interpenetrations of HIV/AIDS discourse and Chicana feminism (which is, I argue, a key conceptual springboard for wider Latino/a studies), this project theorises the ways in which queer Latino cultural producers utilised blood-mixing to comment on the *relationality* of bodies in this period, a theory I have termed “viral mestizaje.” I argue that it is productive to engage with viral transmission as a semblance of mestizaje, as another way of being, or rather *becoming*, of “mixed-blood” at the end of the twentieth century, because HIV transmission, like mestizaje, traces the conceptual transportation of bodily fluids across borders, between people, and between cultures. By viral I mean concurrently the property of a virus, a fluid state – “virus” likely stems from the Proto-Indo-European root “weis,” meaning to melt away or to flow – and an entity or concept which circulates rapidly amongst a group of people, which spreads horizontally from person to person via myriad forms of contact. Considering HIV/AIDS as a form of mestizaje is undoubtedly interesting and necessary, as both of these discourses intimately critique identity formations based on *purity*. Just as bodily fluids infected with HIV connote impurity, mestizaje, as María Lugones asserts, “defies control through simultaneously asserting the impure, curdled multiple state and rejecting fragmentation into pure parts. In this play of assertion and rejection the mestiza is unclassifiable, unmanageable.”<sup>16</sup>

Can mestizaje – constructed by the sensual mingling of bodily fluids and the contamination of often essentialised racial categories – be expanded to envelop gay men with HIV/AIDS as sanguineous allies, as both positions are intimately invested in connections wrought through the imagined amalgamation of blood or other seminal fluids? Indeed the conflation of HIV/AIDS with racial profiling in America, manifested through paradigms of blood donation in particular, has already received some attention. In 1983 the San Francisco Coordinating Committee of Gay and Lesbian Services issued a policy paper insisting that “donor screening [of the blood supply, which persecuted gay men as “high risk,” and thus ineligible, donors] was reminiscent of miscegenation blood laws that divided black blood from white blood.”<sup>17</sup> In *Banning Queer Blood: Rhetorics of Citizenship, Contagion, and Resistance* (2009) Jeffrey Bennett argues that blood quantum rhetoric, such as the “one-drop” rule, is a spectre haunting the U.S. blood donor

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<sup>16</sup> María Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions* (Lanham: Rowman & Little Field Publishers Inc, 2003), 123.

<sup>17</sup> Randy Shilts, *And The Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic* (New York: Penguin, 1987), 220.



questionnaire, where donors are asked “are you a male who has had sexual contact with another male, *even once*, since 1977?”<sup>18</sup> Both look to a single contact, a single moment of *potential* blood-mixing, as a means of identification, separation, and subjugation. Yet what occurs when blood-mixing is not circumscribed within the perimeters of oppressive, racist blood laws, but rather glorified as a marker of Latino/a hybridity? And what occurs when HIV transmission is not facilely aligned with decline but utilised as a productive shared substance?

As these sources make clear, the 1980s and 90s marked a critical historical juncture, when (for arguably the first time) the blood of white men became as suspect and as universally feared as the blood of communities of colour. Much has been written on the segregation of races on account of fallacies of polluting blood, whilst the blood of gay men has been equally maligned and criminalised. Yet, despite the proliferation of queer of colour critique in the past decade, sexuality and race generally continue to be approached as discrete areas of discourse; few commentators have questioned how blood – as a substance of race *and* sexuality – signifies for gay men of colour after the beginning of the AIDS epidemic. With this in mind, and to elucidate my theory of viral mestizaje, I propose to read the works of Gloria Anzaldúa in tandem with queer theorist Tim Dean’s controversial research into barebacking subcultures in North America. Although seemingly radically divergent, I argue that both theorists are invested in tracking the ways that substances flow between bodies to forge new vistas of relationality from outside of heteronormative scripts.

## **Viral Mestizaje**

In *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking* (2009) Dean writes: “The AIDS epidemic has given gay men new opportunities for kinship, because sharing viruses has come to be understood as a mechanism of alliance, a way of forming consanguinity with strangers or friends.”<sup>19</sup> Here, the (possible) transmission of HIV through unprotected anal intercourse is encoded not as a facilitator of bodily debilitation but as a productive exchange, where the sharing of viral matter constitutes alternative, and uniquely queer, ties of kinship that often manifest as bonds of blood. This thesis engages with and extends Dean’s research, to question how viral transmission may signify for gay

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<sup>18</sup> Jeffrey A. Bennett, *Banning Queer Blood: Rhetorics of Citizenship, Contagion, and Resistance* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2009), 37: emphasis added.

<sup>19</sup> Tim Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 6.

Latinos, communities already mired in tropes of blood-mixing in the West (a highly stigmatised intervention, shadowed by regimes of enslavement and colonisation). Dean fails to rigorously evaluate the racial and intercultural implications which always already attend narratives of kinship and blood-sharing in the U.S.; indeed race and ethnicity are only awarded a cursory mention in *Unlimited Intimacy*, imagined as a fetishised component of barebacking aesthetics, visual stimulants that play upon dialectics of serostatus invisibility or intensify disparities in S/M or serodiscordant relations.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, Dean does not adequately consider the conceptual ramifications of infected fluids flowing between racialised bodies; the notion of one man incubating the virus of another in his body, when both men occupy different racial positions and circulate in disparate cultural and historical economies, is a problematic idea that Dean negates but which nevertheless drives this project.<sup>21</sup>

Although *Unlimited Intimacy* contains significant elisions, juxtaposing mestizaje with Dean's insightful renderings of the performativity of HIV transmission is, nonetheless, highly productive.<sup>22</sup> Whilst mestizaje forges and transforms social bonds, "HIV transmission has the potential to create social bonds which are both symbolic and material."<sup>23</sup> Whilst mestizaje traces the interpenetration and "contamination" of disparate lineages, HIV transmission replicates this process, transporting genetic code from one body to another. Whilst mestizo/a bodies stand as corporeal proof that some transgression of strictly policed racial groupings has occurred via means of sexual permissiveness, the spread of HIV reveals an interconnected world, illuminating forms of interpersonal exchange which usually remain concealed. "The virus itself permits unlimited intimacy," Dean insists, "in the sense that it traces the persistence of multiple prior bodily contacts in the present moment."<sup>24</sup> For mixed-race groups in the West, "prior bodily contacts" often reference histories of illicit sexual desire. As Priscilla Wald acknowledges, whilst

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<sup>20</sup> Dean writes: "Racial difference offers one way of polarizing the top and bottom in a sexual encounter, thereby intensifying the exchange of power between positions [...] Figuring it in terms of the visible differences of skin color, say, or generational disparity may eroticize the invisible difference between an HIV-positive man and his HIV-negative partner." Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, 41.

<sup>21</sup> Clinical psychiatrist Michael Shernoff speaks to this aperture, arguing that choosing to adopt (or discard) a regime of condom use in interracial gay relationships often plays on (and into) notions of racial inequality and uneven access to the body of the other in racist American society. See Shernoff, *Without Condoms: Unprotected Sex, Gay Men and Barebacking* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>22</sup> Although Dean's analysis functions specifically in relation to barebacking practices and subcultures, he is effusive in his conviction that viral affiliation cannot be confined to a single space, behaviour, or group, "since barebacking concerns an experience of unfettered intimacy, of overcoming the boundaries between persons, that is far from exclusive to this subculture or, indeed, to queer sexuality." See Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, 2.

<sup>23</sup> Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, 77.

<sup>24</sup> Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, 88.

“communicable disease *offers records* of desire, of violence, of sexual commerce,”<sup>25</sup> so too does mestizaje. Like seroconversion, mestizaje “[turns] us towards new configurations of identity.”<sup>26</sup>

Although mestizaje continues to reference patterns of racial mixture, sexual hybridity, the toppling of gender hierarchies, religious syncretism, and radical borderland consciousness in the growing field of Latino/a studies, for the purposes of this project, mestizaje is best understood as a form of relationality, as a complex and often submerged network of contact which not only references the generational flow of blood and the transmission of cultures but also functions as extending tendrils of affect and intimacy.<sup>27</sup> Mestizaje lends itself to readings of the interrelationality of bodies because mestizaje *performs* links; it is a process which articulates “multiple and relational identity positions.”<sup>28</sup> As Anzaldúa remarks, “the self does not stop with just you, with your body. The self penetrates other things and they penetrate you.”<sup>29</sup> Akin to Édouard Glissant’s theory of creolization, which favours becoming over being, mestizaje, as a form of hybridity, reaches understandability as a fluctuating, rhizomatic structure, in which “each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other.”<sup>30</sup> Creolization, Glissant insists, names “the unstoppable conjunction [...] that opens up torrents of unpredictable results [...] it is the unpredictability that terrifies those who refuse the very idea, if not the temptation, to mix, flow together, and share.”<sup>31</sup> This mixture, this flow, this sharing is at the heart of my analysis, yet in this thesis these processes no longer merely indicate the movement of blood (or rather the rhetorical constructions of blood) through patterns of breeding, now they index the movement of affect through the transmission of HIV. Furthermore, if, as Anzaldúa surmises, the mixed-blood body “has the ability, the flexibility, the malleability, the amorphous quality of being able to stretch, and go this way

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<sup>25</sup> Priscilla Wald, *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), 38; emphasis added.

<sup>26</sup> Suzanne Bost, *Mulattas and Mestizas: Representing Mixed Identities in the Americas, 1850-2000* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2003), 19.

<sup>27</sup> For a discussion of mestizaje as racial mixture see Rafael Pérez-Torres, *Mestizaje: Critical Uses of Race in Chicano Culture* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2006); as sexual hybridity see Alicia Arrizón, *Queering Mestzaje: Transculturation and Performance* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2006); as gendered discourse see Sandoval, ‘Mestizaje as Method’; as religious and spiritual trope see Néstor Medina, *Mestizaje: (Re)Mapping Race, Culture, and Faith in Latina/o Catholicism* (New York: Orbis Books, 2009) and Theresa Delgadillo, *Spiritual Mestizaje: Religion, Gender, Race, and Nation in Contemporary Chicana Narrative* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011); as facet of borderland scholarship see Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*.

<sup>28</sup> Pérez-Torres, *Mestizaje*, 51.

<sup>29</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, “‘Making Choices: Writing, Spirituality, Sexuality, and the Political’” An Interview with AnaLouise Keating, *Gloria E. Anzaldúa: Interviews / Entrevistas*, ed. AnaLouise Keating (New York: Routledge, 2000), 162.

<sup>30</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* [1990], trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997), 11.

<sup>31</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Faulkner, Mississippi* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 30.

and that way,”<sup>32</sup> can propagation through viral dissemination be considered a working of *mestizaje*, a structure of affiliation that sutures bodies together through unrestricted mixing and networks of affect? In this thesis I present Latino/a hybridity as a *viral* phenomenon. “Though most people self-define by what they exclude,” Anzaldúa proffers, “[mestizo/as] define who we are by what we *include*.”<sup>33</sup> Does this, at the end of the twentieth century, include HIV?

To an extent, French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy reinforces this reading: “what we call ‘*mestizaje*’ is the advent of the other. The other is always arriving, and always arriving from elsewhere [...] Everything, everyone – male, female – who alters me, subjects me to *mestizaje*.”<sup>34</sup> To my mind, this rendering of *mestizaje* is striking in its appropriation of viral imagery as here *mestizaje* becomes a moment of alteration through exposure, a moment when the other arrives from some ambiguous outside realm to irrevocably affect the self.<sup>35</sup> For Nancy, *mestizaje* is something which *gets inside*, which would be “*in* people, peoples, histories, events of existence.”<sup>36</sup> Akin to HIV transmission, which Dean tells us maintains the possibility of “establishing an intimate corporeal relation with somebody one has never met or, indeed, could never meet,”<sup>37</sup> because HIV always circulates in economies that transcend the couple, *mestizaje* extends the boundaries of intimate contact precisely because it holds the possibility that those who impact us – “everything, everyone” – will not be known to us. Certainly Nancy’s brand of *mestizaje* is non-heteronormative (even if reduced to a sexual binary of “male, female”); straight desire is not a prerequisite for change, the potentiality that the person who will affect me will share my sex or gender is always palpable. Gender is not inconsequential, but it is rendered subservient within larger networks of contact and alteration.

Furthermore, this interpenetration of people and of cultures is facilitated by rendering the body vulnerable, by violating the borders which interpellate “the body” as a closed entity, and by exposing the lacerating effects of oppression; as Nancy puts it, “It is

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<sup>32</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, ‘Lesbian Wit: Conversation with Jeffner Allen (late 1980s),’ *Gloria E. Anzaldúa*, 133.

<sup>33</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, ‘(Un)natural bridges, (Un)safe spaces,’ *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating (New York: Routledge, 2002), 3: emphasis added.

<sup>34</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, ‘Cut Throat Sun,’ *An Other Tongue: Nation and Ethnicity in the Linguistic Borderlands*, ed. Alfred Arteaga (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994), 123.

However, in a move that obliquely enacts colonising gestures that limit agency, Nancy fails to ascertain the appropriation of terms as part of an activist agenda; by viewing “Chicano/a” as a residual manifestation of colonial oppression he depoliticises the act of naming. Similarly, by advocating that we are all *mestizo* – “A *mestizo* is someone who is on the border, on the very border of *meaning*. And we are all out there, exposed” – he strips this position of its radical potential and its cultural and ethnic specificity.

<sup>35</sup> I in no way wish to suggest, as countless critics have, that HIV/AIDS is something that has arrived in the West from elsewhere; rhetoric of AIDS as “foreign” is something I am keen to hold up to scrutiny.

<sup>36</sup> Nancy, ‘Cut Throat Sun,’ 121: emphasis added.

<sup>37</sup> Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, 88.

the cut that ties me and joins me – to what? To something, to someone that you and I don’t know.”<sup>38</sup> For both Nancy and Anzaldúa, sites of penetration, pain, rupture, violence, and *bleeding*, become ground zero for the construction of new alliances. In her later writing, Anzaldúa entreats all women of colour to stop “overlook[ing] the wounds bonding them to the other”<sup>39</sup> and instead use these wounds “as openings to become vulnerable and available (present) to others.”<sup>40</sup> Wounds and illness (Anzaldúa’s scholarship is certainly shadowed by her personal struggles with premature menstruation and diabetes, with bleeding and with the immune system), like mestizaje and sexual intercourse, puncture bodily boundaries and expose the self to both the outside realm and to the other. If Nancy’s vision of mestizaje imagines a community of strangers joined together imperceptibly, Dean’s meditation on barebacking subcultures – engaging in a form of “unlimited intimacy” where lovers are strangers who remain strange – deploys similar rhetoric: “Bareback sexuality is not paradigmatically that of the intimate pair but that of the group. Barebacking thus may be considered a strategy for taking sexuality beyond dyadic relations into the social. It enlarges the horizon of potential intimacy.”<sup>41</sup>

The mixing of blood, the inter-bleeding of cultures and identities, precipitates the act of joining, forging new ties of relationality between people precisely because, in a visceral way, bleeding evidences the mobility of blood, its propensity, and thus its potential, to reach beyond the borders of the body, the family, the community, and the nation. Indeed bleeding often indicates the extension of colour beyond an edge or border, especially so as to *combine* with a contiguous colour or to affect an adjacent area. For the purposes of my argument, it is the flow of blood which holds significance, not the materiality of the substance itself. Anzaldúa gives voice to this in a short story entitled ‘The vulva is an open wound’: “She is afraid. No not of the blood but of *what happens when someone or something bleeds*.”<sup>42</sup>

For Anzaldúa in the 1980s, mestizaje becomes a mechanism for transformation and valorisation that transcends the sanctity of the couple to reference a loose community or group; the mestizo/a subject, positioned “at the confluence of two *or more* genetic streams,”<sup>43</sup> is galvanised by the uninhibited flow of desire, where bodily fluids mingle with impunity to rearticulate scripts of belonging. Latino/as, conspicuously indexing the

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<sup>38</sup> Nancy, ‘Cut Throat Sun,’ 120.

<sup>39</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, ‘now let us shift...the path of conocimiento...inner work, public acts,’ *This Bridge We Call Home*, 565.

<sup>40</sup> Anzaldúa, ‘now let us shift,’ 571-572.

<sup>41</sup> Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, 79-80.

<sup>42</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, ‘La vulva es una herida abierta / The vulva is an open wound,’ *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, ed. AnaLouise Keating (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 199: emphasis added.

<sup>43</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 99: emphasis added.

intertwining of races, of “blood,” are well positioned to make connections, precisely because they represent the *imagined* amalgamation of diverse racial strains and cultural influences. Mestizaje is an often imperceptible, untraceable unfolding; it emerges as a web of entangled bloodlines, sanguineous skeins which expand horizontally as well as descend vertically. In Anzaldúa’s analysis mestizaje engenders “morphogenesis,”<sup>44</sup> privileging the *fluctuations* of lineages in which substances interact in unexpected ways to produce more complex and unpredictable structures.<sup>45</sup> But far from pertaining to an often reductive rhetoric of racial amalgamation or miscegenation alone, an Anzaldúan brand of hybridity indicates both biological and affective attachments, “the mixture of bloods *and* affinities.”<sup>46</sup>

In a similar fashion, Dean’s research uncovers and constructs a controversial queer subculture in which the affinities forged through sexual contact index the flow of infected semen between bodies, and, most strikingly, imagine this exchange of fluid as a way to achieve consanguinity between gay men:

HIV fulfils several roles in the new narratives that gay men are creating. As a putative object of exchange, it allows men to bond with each other; as a shared substance, it permits those bonds to be conceived in kinship terms, thereby materializing a sense of brotherhood. In view of HIV’s role as an object of exchange, we might say that cum swapping represents the form that homosocial bonding takes among gay men.<sup>47</sup>

In a visceral way, seroconversion plots and engenders the interpenetration of bloodlines via unprotected sex, a system highly reminiscent of human breeding; indeed to “breed” the virus involves the incubation of one man’s viral progeny in the body of another. HIV transmission transports viral RNA from body to body, where it is converted (a process known as reverse transcription), and assimilated into the DNA strand of the host. For barebackers, this process often plays out as fantasies of heteroreproductive kinship. In *The Sluts* (2004), a chronicle of the life of a young gay escort online, queer author Dennis Cooper writes, “I love how gay guys can be like straight guys who wonder how many illegitimate kids there could be out there with their DNA.”<sup>48</sup> However, it is not merely this slippage between patterns of insemination that is productive to a discussion of viral

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<sup>44</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 103.

<sup>45</sup> Intriguingly, for biologist Luis P. Villarreal morphogenesis is also a conserved feature of a virus family, used to deduce a virus lineage which is nevertheless not linear. See Villarreal, *Viruses and the Evolution of Life* (Washington DC: ASM Press, 2005), 11.

<sup>46</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, ‘La Prieta,’ *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* [1981], ed. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, second edition (New York: Kitchen Table, 1983), 209; emphasis added.

<sup>47</sup> Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, 78.

<sup>48</sup> Dennis Cooper, *The Sluts* (New York: Void Books, 2004), 277.

mestizaje; indeed, to align mestizaje and reproduction so fundamentally is certainly reductive. Whilst I am wary of conceptualising mestizaje as a comparable object of exchange, it does illuminate the bonds of relationality which make visible the interaction of self and other. Dean places seroconversion into an economy of “gift-giving,” not because the person who receives “the gift” of the virus can give back in kind (seroconversion is after all always unidirectional), but rather that the bestowing of gifts, a fluid state of communion, builds collectivities through solidarity. Read as a purely biological phenomenon, mestizaje mimics the unreciprocated, generational flow of bodily fluids; read as a cultural collision, as Jacques Audinet tenders, mestizaje “names, indicates, gives existence to, and thereby transforms the *reciprocal* relations between humans.”<sup>49</sup>

The Chicano rights movement (*el Movimiento*), which flourished in the pre-AIDS moment, advocated shared blood as the basis for homosocial solidarity. In the epic poem ‘I am Joaquín’ (1967) Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales imagines blood as a productive substance, linking the protagonist, Joaquín, to “the *gachupín* [Hernan] Cortés, / who also is the blood, the image of myself.”<sup>50</sup> And later: “I was part in blood and spirit of that courageous village priest / Hidalgo who in the year eighteen hundred and ten / rang the bell of independence,”<sup>51</sup> and “I am Joaquín, / Who bleeds in many ways. / The altars of Moctezuma / I stained a bloody red. / My back of Indian slavery / Was stripped crimson.”<sup>52</sup> In a comparable way, Dean imagines HIV as an entity transmitting across generations, suturing men together in a “bug brotherhood,” and endowing homosex with monumental significance: “What would it mean for a young gay man today to be able to trace his virus back to, say, Michel Foucault?” he asks, “By thinking in genealogical terms, we start to appreciate how HIV [like blood-mixing in Gonzales’s poem] becomes a basis of authority and pride rather than of merely stigma or shame.”<sup>53</sup> For Gonzales, the mixing of blood is not restricted to the mingling of races alone, but also indexes moments of contact (note that I do not use the word proximity) across social classes (conquistadors, the clergy, emperors, and slaves), between generations, and *between men*.<sup>54</sup> Dean asserts that the promiscuous

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<sup>49</sup> Jacques Audinet, *The Human Face of Globalization: From Multicultural to Mestizaje* [1999], trans. Frances Dal Chele (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 134: emphasis added.

<sup>50</sup> Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales, ‘I Am Joaquín: An Epic Poem’ [1967], *Latino/a Thought: Culture, Politics, and Society*, ed. Francisco H. Vázquez, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), 16.

<sup>51</sup> Gonzales, ‘I Am Joaquín,’ 16.

<sup>52</sup> Gonzales, ‘I Am Joaquín,’ 19.

<sup>53</sup> Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, 89.

<sup>54</sup> Women are not mentioned in this poem. This oversight occludes the bio-political objectives of miscegenation in colonial Mexico, which included utilising the bodies, labour, and reproductive functions of indigenous women to forge kinship lines and develop political alliances between the Spanish conquistadors and privileged Indian male factions. See Claudio Esteva-Fabregat, *Mestizaje in Ibero-America* [1987], trans. John Wheat (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1995). This access to female sexuality not only acts as a feature of male bonding, as critics such as Eve Sedgwick and Gayle Rubin have noted, it also became a way

mixing and unrestricted cruising that has come to define queer culture, and bareback subcultures in particular, performs a similar feat: “Unregulated sex [...] disrespects the boundaries that separate persons, classes, races, and generations from each other.”<sup>55</sup> More importantly, like Gonzales’s vision of an interconnected mestizo infrastructure, barebackers come to define these transgressions as a product of blood’s flow, as a form of consanguinity.

Gonzales’s iteration of a sprawling sanguineous web of Latino affect is rooted in an earlier text. In 1925 Mexican intellectual and politician José Vasconcelos dubbed Latin Americans *la raza cósmica* (the cosmic race), an ethnic soup impregnated with the blood of all the world’s races:

The germ of every human type will ferment within us, but we shall know that a better race is coming [...] what will arise there is the definitive race, the integral race, the synthesis, made of the character and blood of all peoples and for that very reason better capable of true brotherhood and a truly universal vision.<sup>56</sup>

Dean too imagines the transformative effects which occur from the fermentation of “germs.” “In place of the ‘traffic in women,’” he insists, “we have viral trafficking as the latest incarnation of male bonding.”<sup>57</sup> Interestingly, the germ in a bareback paradigm simultaneously embraces its myriad interpretations; it is at once a disease-provoking microbe, human “seed” in the form of infected semen, and a metaphorical embryo in the early stages of development, gestating in the bodies of gay men to foster kinship. If mestizaje imagines a community channelling the “blood of all peoples,” HIV transmission makes such rhetoric tangible. This dual appropriation of blood – as a substance that builds community through commingling – has registered within gay Latino communities. Commenting on the Day of the Dead festival, a traditional Mexican celebration where people build altars, offer up prayers, and stage carnivals to commemorate their dead, Rene, a San Francisco based, gay Latino informant, admitted: “I felt very strange because in my family’s altars we only had pictures of the ‘blood family’ like dead parents, grandparents,

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to produce cross-racial affiliation for the purposes of patriarchal, colonial expansion. See Gayle Rubin, ‘The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex,’ *Towards an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter (New York: Monthly Review, 1975), 157-210, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

<sup>55</sup> Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, 20.

<sup>56</sup> José Vasconcelos, ‘Mestizaje,’ *José Vasconcelos: The Prophet of Race*, ed. Ilan Stavans (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 64-65.

<sup>57</sup> Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, 78.



and so on. When [a friend] said that our lovers and our friends who had died of AIDS were the ‘true blood brothers’ it made sense.”<sup>58</sup>

Unlike Vasconcelos and the rhetoric of *el Movimiento*, Anzaldúa presents racial and cultural hybridity as immune from strict patterns of heteroreproductive descent; after all, mixed lineages can never be “straight.” Just as Dean conceptualises a new queer coterie, partaking in networks of relationality in which the sharing of bodily fluids is imagined as a form of horizontal (masquerading as vertical) alliance, Anzaldúa fashions what AnaLouise Keating has described as a theory of “radical interconnectedness,”<sup>59</sup> in which bodies hold the presence of other bodies. In the Foreword to *This Bridge Called My Back* Anzaldúa already hints at this personal doctrine of interconnectedness: “we have come to realize that we are not alone in our struggles nor separate nor autonomous but that we – white black straight queer female male – are connected and interdependent.”<sup>60</sup> Here hybridity takes the form of solidarity across seemingly antithetical identity positions, not unlike the “gifting” of the virus which Dean proffers as an exchange ritual “confer[ing] forms of solidarity on [the] participants,”<sup>61</sup> yet with the added proviso that women too participate in this network. Over twenty years later, in *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation* (2002), Anzaldúa’s commitment to relational affinities is still palpable: “we are in symbiotic relationship to all that exists.”<sup>62</sup>

This interconnectedness is invariably accelerated at sites of queerness. Anzaldúa imagines queerness (rather than any facile rendering of gay or lesbian subjectivity) as a physical, psychological, and spiritual means of connection and a quasi-metaphorical substance which renders bodies mutable and penetrable. Queer bodies become, in a sense, bodies without borders, or rather bodies willing to *sacrifice* their borders, to invest in the erotic potential of being boundless. Throughout her writing, Anzaldúa draws lines from her own body to the bodies of other queer people:

As a *mestiza* I have no country, my homeland cast me out; yet all countries are mine because I am every woman’s sister or potential lover. (As a lesbian I have no race, my own people disclaim me; but I am all races because there is the queer of me in all races).<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Cited in Lourdes Arguelles and Anne Rivero, ‘Working with Gay/Homosexual Latinos with HIV Disease: Spiritual Emergencies and Culturally Based Psycho-Therapeutic Treatments,’ *Culture and Difference: Critical Perspectives on the Bicultural Experience in the United States*, ed. Antonia Darder (Westport, Connecticut: Bergin & Garvey, 1995), 159.

<sup>59</sup> AnaLouise Keating, ‘Charting Pathways, Making Thresholds...A Warning, An Introduction,’ *This Bridge We Call Home*, 7.

<sup>60</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, ‘Foreword,’ *This Bridge Called My Back*.

<sup>61</sup> Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, 85.

<sup>62</sup> Anzaldúa, ‘(Un)natural bridges, (Un)safe spaces,’ 2.

<sup>63</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 102.

Queerness becomes imagined as a substance which can be detached from “me” and transmitted to another (and in so doing extending the body’s reach, exquisitely commingling one race with another), materialising as a way to “connect us to each other.”<sup>64</sup> The “queer of me” is both alien and familiar; like the virus it has entered from elsewhere yet been assimilated, never quite part of the self but never fully other. Anzaldúa embraces the ambiguity of queerness by placing it in a cascade of conflations in which nation flows into gender, gender collapses into sexuality, and sexuality seeps into race; as a displaced lesbian feminist of colour she is simultaneously nowhere and everywhere, a boundless being whose multiplicity of identities and variety of experiences allow her to eschew strict notions of contact-via-proximity alone, to position herself *inside* those bodies that live on the margins of mainstream society, replicating herself through non-heteronormative means.

Anzaldúa presents both mestizo/as and homosexuals as transient products of multiple social interpenetrations, fleshy arbiters of cultural transmission able to cross borders and infiltrate multiple spaces simultaneously, subtle agents of transference, marauders of the interstices. This is important because “transformations occur in this in-between space, an unstable, unpredictable, precarious, always-in-transition space lacking clear boundaries,” she insists; inhabiting these spaces, spaces she dubs “nepantla,” “*links us* to other ideas, people, and worlds.”<sup>65</sup> In such a way, Anzaldúa unflaggingly intimates the viral capacity of mestizo/as and queers in this period. The analogies are plentiful: “I, a *mestiza*, continually walk out of one culture and into another, because I am all cultures at the same time;”<sup>66</sup> “*la mestiza* is a product of the *transfer* of the cultural and spiritual values of one group to another;”<sup>67</sup> “I am an act of kneading, of uniting and joining that has not only produced both a creature of darkness and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and gives them new meanings.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 103. However, at a time when HIV/AIDS was rampant in gay communities across America, Anzaldúa’s vision of an interconnected queer coterie may appear utopian to a fault, a criticism consistently levelled at her scholarship. In gay communities, divides began to emerge between HIV-positive and HIV-negative populations. The fault lines bifurcating these communities, lines of political, emotional, and medical dissonance, became the inspiration for psychotherapist Walt Odets’s *In the Shadow of the Epidemic: Being HIV-Negative in the Age of AIDS* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995). As Odets acknowledges, to an extent it became suspect to claim gay identity at this time without also claiming the epidemic.

<sup>65</sup> Anzaldúa, ‘(Un)natural bridges, (Un)safe spaces,’ 1: emphasis added.

<sup>66</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 99.

<sup>67</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 100: emphasis added.

<sup>68</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 103. This statement also has racial overtones, suggesting the coming together of diverse racial groups.

In Anzaldúa's writing, mixed-race bodies are presented simultaneously as products of contamination (malleable, existing concurrently in many spaces, replicating themselves in many diverse cultures) *and* agents of connection, suturing bodies together across great distances and times. She extends this reading to embrace homosexuality, asserting the queer, like the new mestiza, "is in a position to make links."<sup>69</sup>

Being the supreme crossers of cultures, homosexuals have strong bonds with the queer white, Black, Asian, Native American, Latino, and with the queer in Italy, Australia and the rest of the planet. We come from all colors, all classes, all races, all time periods. *Our role is to link people with each other* – the Blacks with Jews with Indians with Asians with whites with extraterrestrials. It is to *transfer* ideas and information from one culture to another.<sup>70</sup>

The tacit positioning of the mestiza/o and the queer as embodied routes of transmission, transporting vital substances between bodies and cultures becomes highly significant when juxtaposed with HIV/AIDS discourse. Certainly in Dean's research gay men "link people with each other" through the sharing of viruses. Anzaldúa outlines a form of relationality which invokes and encompasses a plethora of points of contact across already contrived categories of sexuality, gender, race, and nationality. Queers and mestizo/as exist as embodied interfaces and vital bridges; Anzaldúa imbues them with the ability to infiltrate all spaces, classes, and genders to form powerful alliances. After all, "[Bridges] are passageways, conduits, and connectors that connote transitioning, crossing borders, and changing perspectives."<sup>71</sup> In *Borderlands* she makes what I interpret to be a momentous declaration: "The mestizo and the queer exist at this time and point on the evolutionary continuum *for a purpose*. We are a blending that proves that all blood is intricately woven together, and that we are spawned out of similar souls."<sup>72</sup> Here the mestizo and the queer are linked together by *blood*; the mixing of blood signals interconnectedness across race and sexuality. To create such a correlation in late 80s U.S. culture, when HIV/AIDS was rampant in gay communities, is undoubtedly significant and infallibly radical.

As Anzaldúa indicates, mestizaje is not simply a celebrated form of multiplicity. Sceptical of its glorified status as a marker for the interplay of racial and cultural differences, J. Jorge Klor de Alva decries mestizaje as an ideological stance deployed to obscure the lived realities of legacies of colonisation and the asymmetrical social

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<sup>69</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, 'The New Mestiza Nation,' *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, 212.

<sup>70</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 106-107: emphasis added.

<sup>71</sup> Anzaldúa, '(Un)natural bridges, (Un)safe spaces,' 1.

<sup>72</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 107: emphasis added.

conditions that stratify under the unifying, but impossibly vague, banner of “mixedness.”<sup>73</sup> Juan E. de Castro also rejects mestizaje as an injurious amalgamation of heterogeneous populations into a functional, homogenous (and thus dispensable) unit.<sup>74</sup> For these critics, mestizaje becomes a strategic mechanism of cultural amnesia; the dissonant promise of racial mixing has been transformed into an emblem of ethnic neutralisation. Furthermore, mestizaje is often portrayed as a consequence of violent, exploitative encounters; whilst Cherrie Moraga states that “rape, intermarriage, the African slave trade, and the spread of Catholicism and disease gave birth to a third ‘mestizo’ race that included Indian, African, and European blood,”<sup>75</sup> Rafael Pérez-Torres posits that “racial mixture in the Americas emerged from an unequal and highly textured history of violence and conquest and cheap, inhuman exploitation.”<sup>76</sup> When discussing mestizaje, it must be remembered that mestizaje is rooted in nationalist histories devoted to the seizure of territory.

I do not wish to negate these readings but to embrace them, to argue that certain Latino cultural producers utilised HIV/AIDS as an optic through which to *illuminate* the impact that specific histories of colonialism, rape, war, and imperialism had, and continue to have, on their bodies. Regardless of any perspective which fixes mestizaje as either a negative consequence of violence or a celebrated form of hybridity, mestizaje functions as a theory which highlights the significance of contact between the self and the other; as Glissant contends, mestizaje is “generally speaking, the meeting and synthesis of two differences,”<sup>77</sup> not unlike seroconversion which brings infected and non-infected fluids together. Mestizaje, like the AIDS pandemic, uncovers the covert stickiness of multiple oppressions. Mestizaje, like HIV infection, intimates a becoming via actions, not merely via inheritance. The AIDS epidemic – as something raw, something real – has become a lens through which to confront the *embodied* experiences of those oppressed by racist, homophobic, and nationalistic imaginaries.

“Just what did [the mestiza] inherit from her ancestors?” Anzaldúa asks in *Borderlands*, “which is the baggage from the Indian mother, which the baggage from the Spanish father, which the baggage from the Anglo? *Pero es difícil* differentiating between

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<sup>73</sup> J. Jorge Klor de Alva, ‘Cipherspace: Latino Identity Past and Present,’ *Race, Identity, and Citizenship: A Reader*, ed. Rodolfo D. Torres, Louis F. Mirón, and Jonathan Xavier Inda (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1999), 175.

<sup>74</sup> Juan E. de Castro, *Mestizo Nations: Culture, Race, and Conformity in Latin American Literature* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2002).

<sup>75</sup> Cherrie Moraga, ‘Queer Aztlán: Toward the Reformation of the Chicano Tribe,’ *The Last Generation: Prose and Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press, 1993), 153.

<sup>76</sup> Pérez-Torres, *Mestizaje*, xii.

<sup>77</sup> Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 34.

*lo heredado, lo adquirido, lo impuesto.*”<sup>78</sup> The ordering here is interesting: the Indian female signifies inheritance, the Spanish male references acquisition, the Anglo Other indexes imposition. By endowing the movements of viral matter with significance, by elevating the virus to a position of importance in their creative output, and by subjecting it to close scrutiny, queer Latino cultural producers viscerally illuminate the convergence and interaction of these elements; the assimilation of HIV in (ambiguously raced and sexed) bodies encodes other cultural and societal processes. In this sense, *Unlimited Intimacy* is particularly relevant and helpful because it presents viral transmission as performative, revealing how barebacking subcultures harness this potential in order to *do things*, to *create things*, with viruses. “Focusing so intensively on the virus – rather than on, say, sexual health and erotic pleasure more broadly,” Dean suggests, “enabled an invisible microbe to function as the flash point for all manner of discourse, mythologies, and fantasies.”<sup>79</sup> This thesis extends this observation, arguing that the discourses, mythologies, and fantasies attending HIV/AIDS not only indexed forms of queer desire or scientific fetishisation, as Dean proffers, but also facilitated processes of gay Latino self-actualisation in the U.S.

### **Inventing Latinos, Inventing AIDS**

Latino identity and HIV/AIDS can, and should, be discussed in tandem because, in a most striking fashion, both have emerged at the end of the twentieth century as vexed labels, as heavily charged and overtly burdened discursive constructions. Both remain slippery signifiers. In 1987 Douglas Crimp, arguably the most prolific theorist of the early epidemic, posited that “AIDS does not exist apart from the practices that conceptualize it, represent it, and respond to it. We know AIDS only in and through those practices.”<sup>80</sup> Concurrently, Paula Treichler dubbed AIDS “an epidemic of a transmissible lethal disease *and* an epidemic of meanings or signification.”<sup>81</sup> In the same publication – the foundational *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism* (1988), edited by Crimp – Simon Watney insisted that as well as being an epidemic of signification AIDS in the West functioned as a

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<sup>78</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 104.

<sup>79</sup> Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, 45.

<sup>80</sup> Douglas Crimp, ed., ‘AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism’ [1987], *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), 28.

<sup>81</sup> Paula Treichler, ‘AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification’ [1987], *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988), 32; emphasis added.

spectacle, “elaborately stage-managed as a sensational didactic pageant,”<sup>82</sup> a “public masque in which we witness the corporeal punishment of the ‘homosexual body,’ identified as the enigmatic and indecent source of an incomprehensible, voluntary resistance to the unquestionable governance of marriage, parenthood, and property.”<sup>83</sup> In 1990 Cindy Patton chose to call her literary foray into the subject *Inventing AIDS*; four years later Lee Edelman labelled AIDS a “plague of discourse.”<sup>84</sup> It is clear that the discovery of HIV/AIDS not only marked a site of loss, mourning, and corporeal vulnerability but also denoted an anxiety over the dissolution of stable structures, the fragmentation of coherent identities, the impurity of discourse, and the fallibility of linguistic indicators.

The utilisation of agitprop art by ACT UP and their artistic offshoot Gran Fury also positioned the epidemic as a flurry of competing discourses. In this paradigm, simplified semantics obscured complex rhetoric; visuals disarmed. The strategic appropriation of images sent a clear message of intent: efficacy trumped aesthetics, graphics were charged with the responsibility of contouring social responses, language was transformed into a receptacle host, creating and transmitting perceptions of HIV/AIDS.<sup>85</sup> In this moment representations of HIV/AIDS, and by extension homosexuality and other “deviant” behaviour, oscillated between literal and figural sites, signification trounced science and facile notions of identity were being displaced.

However, what has failed to garner recognition is the observation that “Latino/a” emerged as a semantic category of identity at the same time as “HIV/AIDS” and has been just as ambiguous and incoherent. If Latino/as can hail from all races, religions, or nations, if they do not share a common gender, sexuality, class, or language, then who counts as Latino/a? This dilemma has saturated Latino/a studies. For Chicana feminists Norma Alarcón and Chéla Sandoval Latino/as constitute an “identity-in-difference”<sup>86</sup> furnished with an “oppositional consciousness.”<sup>87</sup> Here difference and oppositionality not only act as touchstones for Latino/a empowerment, they are positioned as central tenets contouring a collective, if loosely defined, identity. Unlike the term “Hispanic,” which was “at least

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<sup>82</sup> Simon Watney, ‘The Spectacle of AIDS,’ *AIDS*, 80.

<sup>83</sup> Watney, ‘The Spectacle of AIDS,’ 83.

<sup>84</sup> See Cindy Patton, *Inventing AIDS* (New York: Routledge, 1990) and Lee Edelman, *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>85</sup> See Douglas Crimp with Adam Rolston, *AIDS demo graphics* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1990).

<sup>86</sup> Norma Alarcón, ‘Conjugating Subjects in the Age of Multiculturalism,’ *Mapping Multiculturalism*, ed. Avery F. Gordon and Christopher Newfield (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 127.

<sup>87</sup> Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed*, 62.

originally, an artifact created and imposed by state administrative agencies,”<sup>88</sup> Latino/a comes to be understood, José Esteban Muñoz suggests, as a social movement, because to claim an identity that decisively pushes one off “majoritarian maps of the public sphere” is always a radical manoeuvre.<sup>89</sup> If “Hispanic” continues to reference an indebted identity, harking back to European domination and continuing to reference people originating from mainland Spain, “Latino/a” intimates the embodied experiences of modern agents and their often tenuous relationship to the U.S. nation-state.<sup>90</sup> I choose to link Latino identity and HIV/AIDS together because as denigrated ciphers in America (which came to prominence in the 80s) they both, to return to Anzaldúa, “cross over, pass over, [and] go through the confines of the normal.” Although it should resist becoming an easy catchall, I use Latino/a consistently throughout this thesis; however, where possible I defer to the ethnonyms adopted by the cultural producers themselves, be it Puerto Rican, Nuyorican (a conflation of New York Puerto Rican), Cuban(o), mestizo, Chicano, Tejano, or Mexican-American.

This thesis focuses upon a wide range of Latino producers, occupying disparate ethnic identities and divergent geographical space, for several reasons. More specifically for the purposes of my central hypothesis, I am thinking of the ways people are linked by the flow of blood and the rhetorical infrastructures and representational apparatuses that this conjures and sustains. Therefore it would be detrimental to limit this study to an ethno-political denomination, such as Chicanos, or to a geopolitical location, such as the Southwest. As Miguel Algarín – poet, academic, and co-founder of the prominent New York art space The Nuyorican Poets Cafe – argues, the rise of the Nuyorican movement in the 1970s and 80s, which venues such as the Cafe helped to facilitate, was never “meant to isolate or have the kind of myopic ethnicity that, let’s say, black separatists did in the ‘60s. Anyway, we Latino people have understood that when you’re separate, you’re not equal.”<sup>91</sup> By the 1980s the creation of several independent publishing houses, primarily dedicated to airing the works of feminists-of-colour, encouraged diverse groups of Latino/as – Chicano/as, Cubans, Puerto Ricans – to come together in print for arguably the first time. *This Bridge Called My Back* is a prime example. Furthermore, coalition building is necessary and important. At a time when homosexuality and positive serostatus were

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<sup>88</sup> Suzanne Oboler, *Ethnic Labels, Latino Lives: Identity and the Politics of (Re)Presentation in the United States* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1995), xv.

<sup>89</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, ‘Feeling Brown: Ethnicity and Affect in Ricardo Bracho’s *The Sweetest Hangover (and Other STDs)*,’ *Gay Latino Studies: A Critical Reader*, ed. Michael Harnes-García and Ernesto Javier Martínez (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 204.

<sup>90</sup> For an opposing view of the Latino versus Hispanic debate, see Raoul Lowery Contreras, *A Hispanic View: American Politics and the Politics of Immigration* (Lincoln, Nebraska: Writers Club Press, 2002).

<sup>91</sup> Miguel Algarín, ‘His Cafe Is Alive With the Spoken Word,’ Interview between Algarín and David Berreby, *Newsday*, Wednesday 5<sup>th</sup> December 1990, 129.

highly maligned identity positions, when coalitions were essential to the curbing of a devastating epidemic, division along racial and ethnic lines were potentially damaging.

### **Before Combination Therapy**

In *Dry Bones Breathe: Gay Men Creating Post-AIDS Identities and Cultures* (1998) Eric Rofes pinpoints the 1996 International AIDS conference held in Vancouver, Canada – where the success of protease inhibitors was officially announced – as a turning point in the history of the epidemic; he dubbed this historical juncture the “protease moment,” a period marked by biomedical developments and cultural shifts.<sup>92</sup> Although Rofes notes that the years directly after the protease moment saw an intense backlash against pronouncements that new treatments engendered an altered reality for the majority of people living with AIDS, he urges gay communities to view AIDS-as-crisis as an outdated model: “The everyday lives of gay men throughout the nation [...] make clear one thing: AIDS-as-crisis, as defined by epicentre gay men in the 1980s, is over.”<sup>93</sup>

David Román takes umbrage with attempts to construct “Post-AIDS” identities in the millennial moment, a move that had a negative effect on monetary allocation to AIDS-related policies, AIDS philanthropy, and the maintenance of safer sex practices:

While white gay men who argue for the end of AIDS neglect to account for increasing infection rates among racial minorities, leaders in communities of color discount queer people in the AIDS emergency discourse that calls attention to AIDS in their communities. Queers of color do not fare well in these scenarios. In fact, homosexuality and race continue to be imagined as oppositional.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Eric Rofes, *Dry Bones Breathe: Gay Men Creating Post-AIDS Identities and Cultures* (New York: The Haworth Press, 1998), 29.

<sup>93</sup> Rofes, *Dry Bones Breathe*, 28. This caesura in the narrative of the epidemic was famously documented by conservative gay pundit Andrew Sullivan in ‘When Plagues End,’ a *New York Times Magazine* article published in November 1996, which hailed combination therapy as an unequivocal success. In *Private Affairs: Critical Ventures in the Culture of Social Relations* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1999) Phillip Brian Harper expresses his scepticism over Sullivan’s claim, arguing that activist efforts in the 80s and early 90s contributed significantly to scientific knowledge and engendered a shift in consciousness that enabled HIV/AIDS to be imagined as a chronic illness rather than a death sentence. Harper directly criticises Sullivan’s article as an ineffectual response aimed exclusively at white male communities with the ability to procure expensive drugs, a response which does not deny the reality that many racial minorities will still contract the disease and die but does dismiss the significance of these deaths. Indeed, Sullivan fails to mention that the introduction of life-changing therapies coincided with the 1996 Welfare Reform Act, a piece of legislation that slashed welfare, depleted already strained health care resources, and exacerbated racial disparities in American society.

<sup>94</sup> David Román, ‘Not-About-AIDS,’ *GLQ*, 6(1): 1 (2000), 1-28, 7. Also see Michael Warner, *The Trouble With Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999).



It seems clear that AIDS-as-crisis is a model that was developed in the 1980s and early 90s to represent the concerns of a particular demographic – white, middle-class, gay men in urban centres – tacitly negating the experiences of marginal populations; to speak of the end of the AIDS crisis implicitly suggests that AIDS was only ever a crisis for a specific social faction. Rofes fails to ask whose agenda is served by framing AIDS-as-crisis and, more importantly, whose interests are disavowed.

Although HIV/AIDS has disproportionately affected communities of colour and economically disadvantaged sections of the population, comparatively little has been written about the epidemic through the critical lens of race theory. While shifting AIDS demographics following the introduction of combination therapy – a move from white, middle-class, gay men in the West to poor, ethnic-minority, heterosexual communities and those living outside the West – has been well documented, the overwhelming amount of the discourse produced in the early years of the epidemic deployed gay white males as the tacit subject; here the indelible threat that AIDS signified was to the mythic coherence of white masculinity. Even cultural production that pivoted around the experiences of queer people-of-colour often failed to adequately explore the impact of the epidemic.<sup>95</sup> The coverage of the early years of AIDS is simplistic to a fault, just another example of how the issues of minority groups are sidelined in times of domestic crisis. Indeed HIV/AIDS has, from the beginning, been implicit in instigating and maintaining racist agendas in North America. Certainly it came to prominence at a time when the Reagan administration was scaling back social services and undermining civil rights legislation, actions which adversely impacted communities of colour. With the introduction of crack cocaine in the 1980s AIDS became just another example of degeneracy in these communities.

This is further illuminated in Cathy J. Cohen's important work, *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics* (1999), in which she argues that during the first decades of AIDS black communities in North America were unable to rally around the rhetoric of AIDS-as-crisis (a phenomenon which had contributed to the image of a cohesive, predominantly white, gay community), as the disease was fashioned as yet another social blight afflicting impoverished, racialised factions. Furthermore, distrust of the American health system was rife amongst African-American populations, facilitated by legacies of medical abuse and residual animosity over the infamous Tuskegee syphilis

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<sup>95</sup> Jennie Livingston's documentary *Paris is Burning* (1990), which chronicles the lives of African-American and Latino gay men and transsexuals participating in New York City's drag ball culture, has achieved mainstream cult status yet is conspicuous in its negation of HIV/AIDS, which despite being rife at the time is only awarded a cursory mention.

experiments.<sup>96</sup> In the face of centuries of racially-motivated deprivation the desire to construct a stable group identity was now undermined by HIV/AIDS, a disease which indelibly cut across a multiplicity of issues, emphasising the fragility of identity markers. Single-issue politics were no longer feasible; indeed, as Cohen posits, AIDS directly impacted upon intracommunity patterns of cultural membership through its very irreducibility to race alone.<sup>97</sup> Similarly, the focus on sexual identity occluded the significance of race, gender, and nationality; for a population burdened by hyper-stylised depictions of aberrant sexual voraciousness, claiming non-normative sexuality in the time of AIDS was often counter-productive to eradicating racism. This is perhaps best demonstrated by the rise of Down-Low culture and practices in this period, a predominantly African-American phenomenon which denotes sexual acts performed “on the down low” between men who do not or cannot necessarily align with a stable gay or homosexual identity.<sup>98</sup>

Despite these negations, there is a significant archive of creative output by African-American gay men in this period, much of which addressed the mushrooming AIDS epidemic. In one of the first direct literary responses to HIV/AIDS, Samuel R. Delany penned ‘A Tale of Plagues and Carnivals,’ published in *Flight from Nevèrÿon* (1985), which drew explicit parallels between the effects of a mysterious and fatal sexually-transmitted disease predominantly gripping the homosexual inhabitants of the fictional land of Nevèrÿon, and the experiences of the “down-and-outs” of the modern day metropolis, the homeless, the drug-addicts, and the hustlers who Delany interacted with daily on the streets of New York. In 1989 Marlon Riggs released the path-breaking quasi-documentary *Tongues Untied*, in which he talks of the friends he has lost to AIDS. The 90s saw the publication of Essex Hemphill and Joseph Beam’s stellar anthology *Brother to Brother* (1991), which showcased many depictions of the effects of AIDS for black gay men, the release of *Ceremonies* (1992), Hemphill’s collection of prose and poetry, and the Lambda award winning anthology *Sojourner: Black Gay Voices in the Age of AIDS* (1993)

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<sup>96</sup> In the Tuskegee experiments poor, black communities were, unbeknownst to them, deliberately infected with syphilis bacterium on the premise that they were receiving free health care from the U.S. government. Intriguingly the explanation given for these trials was the treatment of “bad blood.” This practice continued for over forty years, only ending in the early 1970s. It is easy to imagine why some African-American communities would view the discovery of HIV/AIDS a decade later with acute suspicion. See Harriet A. Washington, *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Doubleday, 2006).

<sup>97</sup> Cathy J. Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 36.

<sup>98</sup> See Keith Boykin, *Beyond the Down Low: Sex, Lies, and Denial in Black America* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2005); Jason King, *On the Down Low: A Journey into the Lives of ‘Straight’ Black Men Who Sleep with Men* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2005).

edited by B. Michael Hunter, a member of the dynamic New York based black gay writers collective Other Countries, which formed in 1986. Novelists Melvin Dixon, Randall Kenan, and Darieck Scott, poet Assotto Saint, performance troupe Pomo Afro Homos, and photographer Alvin Baltrop also rose to prominence in the black gay cultural arts movement of the 80s and 90s.

However, the cultural production of gay Latino men in this period has failed to garner similar recognition. Indeed this demographic were almost invisible in early queer theory and the burgeoning work around AIDS.<sup>99</sup> If the 1980s was touted as the “decade of the Hispanic”<sup>100</sup> then it was of the Hispanic woman. The meteoric rise of Third World feminism, third wave feminism, borderland feminism, and Chicana feminism meant that analyses of the intersections of sexuality, race, class, and nation in Latino/a communities were often gender-exclusive. The publication of Ray González’s edited anthology *Muy Macho: Latino Men Confront Their Manhood* in 1996, at the tail-end of “AIDS-as-crisis,” suggests there was a need for an elaboration of this subject which this volume rectified. No significant study of gay Latino men responding to HIV/AIDS appeared until the late 1990s, after the introduction of protease inhibitors.<sup>101</sup> I do not contend that this display of female dominance should be lamented or diluted or negated; rather, I imply that space should be made for queer Latino men in this period.

Perhaps gay Latino men were unable to construct a cogent and recognisable collective because of the impact of the AIDS epidemic. “If homosexuality is the greatest taboo in Hispanic culture,” gay Colombian writer Jaime Manrique attests, “AIDS is the unspeakable.”<sup>102</sup> Horacio N. Roque Ramírez argues that even the slender range of safe-sex campaigns designed for Latino men-who-have-sex-with-men (MSM) in San Francisco advocated silence and invisibility rather than a re-framing of identity or greater transparency.<sup>103</sup> One black-and-white photograph plastered on buses running along Mission Street (a densely populated Latino district) in 1995 depicted a handsome Latino

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<sup>99</sup> In 2011 Michael Hames-García and Ernesto Javier Martínez edited arguably the first collection of essays that attempted to situate gay Latino discourse as an autonomous, collaborative body of scholarship. See Hames-García and Martínez, *Gay Latino Studies*.

<sup>100</sup> Frank del Olmo argues that “The phrase ‘Decade of the Hispanic’ was first used in an article about Latino appointees working in the Carter Administration published by U.S. News & World Report in 1978. Many Latinos working in Washington, D.C., at the time were quoted by the news magazine, but the final word went to a Cuban-American named Maria Elena Torano. ‘The blacks had the decade of the ‘60s; women had the ‘70s. The ‘80s will be the decade for Hispanics,’ she said.” See del Olmo, ‘Latino ‘Decade’ Moves into ‘90s,’ *Los Angeles Times*, December 14<sup>th</sup> 1989.

<sup>101</sup> See Rafael M. Díaz, *Latino Gay Men and HIV: Culture, Sexuality, and Risk Behavior* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>102</sup> Jaime Manrique, ‘Manuel Puig: The Writer as Diva,’ *Christopher Street* (July 1993), 26.

<sup>103</sup> Horacio N. Roque Ramírez, ‘Gay Latino Cultural Citizenship: Predicaments of Identity and Visibility in San Francisco in the 1990s,’ *Gay Latino Studies*, 175-197.

man, flashing a tantalising smile and confidently brandishing a wrapped condom. Emblazoned below were the words, “En mi familia nadie sabe que yo tengo sexo con hombres. Por eso los protejo” (“In my family no one knows that I have sex with men. That’s why I protect them”). Not only does this campaign buttress the silence and loneliness of the closet, whilst kicking down the doors – the man is after all playfully confessing his sexual predilections – it reinforces the tacit value of the heteropatriarchal family unit. The man engaging in homosex must protect this sacred unit from the threat of AIDS and homosexuality; he sheaths his sexuality in silence by reaching for a condom, an act that facilitates his continued acceptance within heteronormative society. One of the primary aims of this project is to address these silences, to bring together, for arguably the first time, some of the most vibrant and moving responses to AIDS created by self-proclaimed gay Latino men before the transformative “protease moment.”

Recently, a stream of reparatory work focusing upon often sidelined queer Latino figures grappling with the effects of racism and homophobia in this period (through cultural production) has emerged. Among these figures is Nuyorican transgender activist Sylvia Rivera, a participant in the Stonewall Rebellion of 1969, member of the Puerto Rican Young Lords, and co-founder of the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR).<sup>104</sup> Unfortunately, Cristina Hayworth, another Stonewall veteran and prominent Puerto Rican activist, has failed to garner similar attention. Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé and Ricardo Montez’s research on the lives of Nuyoricans Juan Rivera (a.k.a Juanito Xtravaganza) and Angel Ortiz (a.k.a LA2) respectively have uncovered not only the often occluded collaborative influences of renowned pop artist Keith Haring but also the erotic economies of cross-racial desire and the politics of racial (in)visibility and exploitation that bolstered the reputations of white cultural producers and the market economy of the New York art scene in the 1980s and 90s.<sup>105</sup> Nuyorican Poets Cafe co-founder Miguel Piñero’s bisexuality, hinted at in Leon Ichaso’s 2001 biopic *Piñero* starring Benjamin Bratt, and his sexual relationship and subsequent collaborations with Chinese-American visual artist

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<sup>104</sup> See Benjamin Shepard, ‘Sylvia and Sylvia’s Children: A Battle for a Queer Public Space,’ *That’s Revolting: Queer Strategies for Resisting Assimilation*, ed. Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2004); Layli Phillips and Shomari Olugbala, ‘Sylvia Rivera: Fighting in Her Heels: Stonewall, Civil Rights, and Liberation,’ *The Human Tradition in the Civil Rights Movement*, ed. Susan M. Glisson (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2006); Jessi Gan, ‘Still at the Back of the Bus: Sylvia Rivera’s Struggle,’ *CENTRO Journal* 19, no. 1 (Spring 2007), 124-39.

<sup>105</sup> Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé, *Queer Latino Testimonio, Keith Haring, and Juanito Xtravaganza: Hard Tails* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Ricardo Montez, ““Trade” Marks: LA2, Keith Haring, and a Queer Economy of Collaboration,’ *GLQ*, 12: 3 (2006), 425-40.

Martin Wong who would later die of AIDS have generated a surge of scholarship.<sup>106</sup>

Chicano drag queen and performance artist Robert Legorreta (a.k.a. Cyclona), mourning his close friend Mundo Meza's death from AIDS, was a prominent figure in L.A.'s HIV/AIDS services, as documented in his recently collated archive, *The Fire of Life*, and subsequent retrospectives of his work.<sup>107</sup> As is becoming clear, although the efforts of queers of colour to record the effects of the epidemic in their communities has received woefully little attention (contrast this to the explosion of literature, art, performance, and film produced by white, gay men chronicling HIV/AIDS in the early years of the crisis), gay Latinos have been articulating their reactions to AIDS since the early 80s.<sup>108</sup>

This thesis adopts an interdisciplinary approach, bringing together different forms of cultural production. This is rare, as scholarship in this area has thus far tended to focus upon a single discipline or a particular ethnic group inhabiting a specific urban enclave, rather than making connections across mediums or between groups. There have been significant texts documenting Latino AIDS theatre.<sup>109</sup> An article has been published reviewing novels by Latino/a authors depicting the epidemic.<sup>110</sup> Pages have been dedicated to compiling the influence of HIV/AIDS on gay Latino art.<sup>111</sup> Concurrently, HIV/AIDS featured heavily in the creation of Latino/a cultural organisations in the 80s and 90s. In Los Angeles there was VIVA, a gay and lesbian Latino/a arts organisation which encompassed most of the significant queer Chicano cultural producers such as Teatro VIVA!, Gil

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<sup>106</sup> See *Sweet Oblivion: The Urban Landscape of Martin Wong*, ed. Amy Scholder (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1998). The Martin Wong papers form part of the Downtown collection housed at New York University's Fales Library.

<sup>107</sup> Robb Hernandez collated the Cyclona archive and published the companion text *The Fire of Life: The Robert Legorreta-Cyclona Collection, 1962-2002* in 2009. He is currently collaborating with ONE: National Gay and Lesbian Archives in Los Angeles on the first retrospective of Mundo Meza's work. Also see Jennifer Flores Sternad, 'Cyclona and Early Chicano Performance Art: An Interview with Robert Legorreta,' *GLQ*, 12: 3, 2006, 475-490.

<sup>108</sup> For a discussion of HIV/AIDS in queer Latino literature see Manuel Ramos Otero, *El libro de la muerte* (1985), *Invitación al polvo* (1991); Michael Nava, The Henry Rios mystery series (1986-2000); Juan David Acosta-Posada, *Grasping for Light* (1989), *Migrations to Solitude* (1993), *Songs to Survive the Body* (1993); Roy Gonsalves, *Perversion* (1990); Moisés Agosto, *Poems of Immune Logic* (1991); Jaime Manrique, *Latin Moon in Manhattan* (1991); Elías Miguel Muñoz, *The Greatest Performance* (1991); Reinaldo Arenas, *Before Night Falls* (1992); Richard Rodriguez, *Days of Obligation* (1992); Daniel Torres, *Morirás si da una primavera* (1993); Rane Arroyo, *Columbus's Orphan* (1993), *How to Name a Hurricane* (2005); Rafael Campo, *The Other Man Was Me* (1994), *What the Body Told* (1996), *The Desire to Heal* (1997); Harry Kondoleon, *Diary of a Lost Boy* (1995); Carlos Antonio Rodríguez Matos, *PoeSIDA* (1995); Miguel Algarín, *Love is Hard Work* (1997); Emanuel Xavier, *Pier Queen* (1997), *Christ Like* (2009); Carlos T. Mock, *Borrowing Time* (2003).

<sup>109</sup> *Ollantay Theater Magazine* 2, no. 2, special issue, *Latino Theater on AIDS*, ed. Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez (1994); David Román, *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998); Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez, *José Can You See? Latinos On and Off Broadway* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999).

<sup>110</sup> Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez, 'Breaking the Silence, Dismantling Taboos: Latino Novels on AIDS,' *Journal of Homosexuality*, Volume 32, Issue 3-4, 1998, 155-175.

<sup>111</sup> See Rudi C. Bleys, *Images of Ambiente: Homotextuality and Latin American Art 1810 – Today* (London and New York: Continuum, 2000).

Cuadros, Cory Roberts-Auli, Asco, Mundo Meza, and Cyclona.<sup>112</sup> In New York there was the Organisation of Puerto Rican Artists (O.P. Art), a grassroots collective founded in 1993 by a loosely affiliated group of artists to showcase and preserve the work of Puerto Rican artists during the devastation of the epidemic. These organisations are only just beginning to receive due recognition. In adding to this recent surge of academic inquiry, and by making connections across this diverse and ephemeral queer Latino archive I hope to enrich scholarship surrounding the early years of HIV/AIDS in America and bring marginal figures in Latino/a studies to the fore of current scholarship.

Latinos are just like AIDS. When Residente uttered these words he was tapping into a torturous and complex history of Latino/a oppression in America. The descendants of colonial encounters between differently raced bodies, Latino/as are imagined (and imaged) as subjects that have crossed over sanctioned lines of racial separation, beings that stand as evidence of unrestricted, taboo sexual permissiveness, citizens that are ambivalently positioned in relation to the U.S. nation-state. But what if this history is claimed as a site of pride, agency, and a new radical consciousness? By the 1980s Latino/as had authoritatively embraced mixture as “the central metaphor, the active component of the intercultural process.”<sup>113</sup> Transgression, hybridity, and interconnectedness became the (ambivalent) touchstones for late twentieth century Latino/a identity.<sup>114</sup> The cultural producers chronicled in this thesis defiantly read against the grain of mainstream antipathy, (re)claiming the very sites of their alterity. They inhabit the identity markers of queer, Latino, HIV/AIDS (often ambivalently, always troublingly) in order to buck stultifying narratives and to defy the neutralisation or demonization of their experiences. Furthermore, they adopt these positions in order to comment on the relatedness of bodies in this period and they construct bonds of affect through non-heteronormative desire and the transmission of disease. This thesis examines what is created when the mixing of blood brands one as racially and culturally polymorphous and corporeally vulnerable to a

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<sup>112</sup> The VIVA archives are held at the Chicano Studies Research Center at the University of California, Los Angeles and at ONE: National Gay and Lesbian Archives also located in L.A.

<sup>113</sup> Lucy R. Lippard, *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), 151.

<sup>114</sup> The role of mixture and hybridity has been extremely bifurcated in Latino/a discourse. For example Rafael Pérez-Torres writes: “mixture – whether cultural, racial, social, or national – seems to occupy a place of privilege in a U.S. contemporary national imaginary. On a cultural level, hybridity and its myriad manifestations have become keywords in understanding change, alteration, and regeneration.” See Pérez-Torres, ‘Miscegenation Now!’ *American Literary History*, vol. 17, no. 2 (Summer 2005), 369. However, Sandra K. Soto expresses her dissatisfaction with poststructuralist-orientated discourse that indiscriminately posits buzzwords of marginality (heterogeneity, fluidity, hybridity) as synonymous with transgression, inadvertently bolstering the fantasy of a normative, stable discursive centre. See Soto, *Reading Chican@ Like a Queer: The De-Mastery of Desire* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 2010), 3-4.

potentially fatal viral agent, when one becomes simultaneously the half-breed and the half-dead.

# Chapter One

## Subjects in America

### Spatial Transgressions and Racial Ambiguity

To discuss blood-mixing as an interface between Latino and HIV/AIDS at the close of last century is to explore the circulation of emotion, the effects that fear and anxiety have on racial determination, the iconography of disease, and the validity of desire. Entering discourse at the same moment as semantic categories (the 1980s), Latino/a identity and HIV/AIDS represent an intense confrontation with otherness; both elicited fear as harbingers of immorality and societal decline; both pertained to groups of people subjected to exclusion by a powerful and paranoid nation-state; both circulated in rhetorical and historical economies of non-normative, unsanctioned intimacy. But, as this thesis delineates, little has been written on their relationality in this period.

Of those critics who have addressed this discursive lacuna, prominent Puerto Rican theatre critic Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez is arguably the most prolific and persuasive. The silences that still pervade the layering of homosexuality, Latino, and HIV/AIDS in the U.S. provide the impetus for his 2005 article, 'Politicizing Abjection: In the Manner of a Prologue for the Articulation of AIDS Latino Queer Identities.' As the subtitle suggests, this essay is crafted as a springboard into a new theoretical arena, presented as a loose recitation of memories and anxieties, interspersed with snippets of theory and extracts taken from the author's unpublished play *Side Effects*, a chronicle of his experiences as a gay Puerto Rican migrant with AIDS, performed in October 1993 at Mount Holyoke College where he taught Spanish literature. Describing what he terms the "self-imposed s/exile"<sup>1</sup> of a generation of gay Latino migrants, he writes: "*Y ahora aquí, we all carry nuestros muertos in our skin, in our eyes, in our lips, in our tongues, en nuestros culos, en*

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<sup>1</sup> Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez, 'Politicizing Abjection: In the Manner of a Prologue for the Articulation of AIDS Latino Queer Identities,' *American Literary History*, vol. 17, no. 3, Fall 2005, 542-549, 542.

"Sexile" is a term first coined by Puerto Rican critic Manuel Guzmán in the essay 'Pa' La Escuelita con Mucho Cuida'o y por la Orillita': A Journey through the Contested Terrains of the National and Sexual Orientation,' *Puerto Rican Jam: Rethinking Colonialism and Nationalism*, ed. Frances Negrón-Muntaner and Ramón Grosfoguel (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1997). It describes a person who through choice or through necessity has left their country of origin in order to achieve some sense of sexual liberation and protection under the law.



*nuestros pingas, en nuestros corazones, en nuestros sangre*, 'til death do us part. Since 1981, with AIDS, *vivimos* immersed in a sea of abjection."<sup>2</sup> If "El SIDA is the ultimate embodiment of abjection"<sup>3</sup> for Sandoval-Sanchez (note that he replaces the acronym AIDS for its Spanish counterpart), then the conflation of AIDS with other identity positions encoded as wretched and dirty, namely gay and Latino, is the nadir of abjection. "How much more abject can you get when you are *un Latino maricón con SIDA*," he entreats, "All in one package."<sup>4</sup> Whilst the vast majority of (Anglo-American) cultural producers responding to the effects of HIV/AIDS in the early years of the epidemic conceptualised the virus as a formless, highly metaphorical, and ambiguous entity which worked to undermine subjectivity, for gay Latinos grappling with the realities of corporeal decline and persecution the virus became understood as an entity which affected not only their sexual, racial, and ethnic identifications, but their very status in a country that continuously affirmed their place as Other, and mandated their role as perpetual and contingent object.

This chapter seeks to deepen this discussion of abjection: the affective impulse that generates feelings of disgust, the mechanism that functions to protect the subject through the exclusion of matter deemed dangerous or repulsive. Mired in chaos and confusion, abjection occurs when one casts out, when one excludes, from the self that which is part of the self. In this chapter I contend that not only did Latino/a groups in this period emerge through narratives of exclusion – due to their liminal identity as transgressive, border-crossing figures that fell beyond the boundaries of facile racial classifications – but that these narratives also resonated within the contemporaneous construction of HIV/AIDS, stigmatised as a new illness which required protection-through-separation. Furthermore, I contend that for queer Latinos, confronting HIV/AIDS transformed how they understood themselves *as* Latino, as an already stigmatised, racially ambiguous, heterogeneous group residing within the boundaries of the United States.

As the first cases of AIDS were being reported in the U.S., prominent Bulgarian-French feminist and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva published *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, translated into English in 1982.<sup>5</sup> Kristeva's notes on abjection seem prudent to a discussion of HIV/AIDS for at least two distinct (yet interrelated) reasons: the

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<sup>2</sup> Sandoval-Sánchez, 'Politicizing Abjection,' 542-543. This translates as "Here and now, we all carry our death in our skin, in our eyes, in our lips, in our tongues, in our asses, in our pricks, in our hearts, in our blood, 'til death do us part. Since 1981, with AIDS, we live immersed in a sea of abjection."

<sup>3</sup> Sandoval-Sánchez, 'Politicizing Abjection,' 544.

<sup>4</sup> Sandoval-Sánchez, 'Politicizing Abjection,' 544.

<sup>5</sup> After *Powers of Horror* was published, abjection was catapulted to the centre of postmodern discourse. Certainly this treatise had a profound influence on Western artistic production in the 1980s and 1990s with controversial artists such as Ron Athey, Franco B., Keith Hennessey, and Andres Serrano choosing to utilise those bodily fluids deemed repellent, namely blood, saliva, semen, and urine, in their art.

ambiguity of subject/object distinctions, and the centrality of transgression. Simply stated, abjection emerges in the mutual becoming of subject and object, and in the relationality between the two. Abjection is experienced (predominantly as a feeling of disgust, often accompanied by a physical convulsion) when the development of this seemingly healthy, symbiotic relation fails or is, even temporarily, diverted. “When I am beset by abjection,” Kristeva declares, “the twisted braid of affects and thoughts I call by such a name does not have, properly speaking, a definable *object*. The object is not an ob-ject facing me, which I name or imagine.”<sup>6</sup> This ambiguity, this impossibility, creates the very conditions needed for the arrival of the object.

However, I argue that the relatedness of subject and object is affected by HIV/AIDS. The interplay of subject and object is complicated when the symbiosis of this binary opposition is displaced to make way for another duality, that of host and virus; interactions with a stable object have been removed, replaced by intimacy with viral matter which is at once foreign and part of the self. HIV, as an invisible pathogen, is certainly a highly ambiguous object, which, as both concept and reality, provokes feelings of fear and disgust precisely because it challenges the stability of the “I,” because it disrupts the coherency of subjectivity. Simultaneously alien (entering the host from somewhere else) and part of the host body (assimilated into the DNA strand, permanently homed) the virus has been popularly conceptualised as both self and not-self, as neither subject nor object. The fact that HIV/AIDS is continuously euphemised, shrouded in obscuring metaphors, adds to this sense of “the virus” as an indefinable object, constantly out-of-place, everywhere and nowhere.<sup>7</sup> With this in mind, it is certainly not difficult to imagine HIV/AIDS as a referent haunting Kristeva’s foray into abjection, as the cause of “one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that *seems* to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, rejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable.”<sup>8</sup> Even the test to ascertain whether HIV is present in the bloodstream does not measure its presence but rather responds to the reaction of the immune system as it produces antibodies to combat the unknown viral agent; one becomes defined as seropositive because of a biological trigger which seeks to maintain the boundaries between self and not-self, between the subject and what the subject is not.

Taking my cue from Sandoval-Sánchez and Kristeva, I propose that it is productive to use abjection to analyse the position of gay Latinos in the United States responding to

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<sup>6</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* [1980], trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 1.

<sup>7</sup> See Susan Sontag, *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (London: Penguin, 1989).

<sup>8</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 1: emphasis added.

the effects of HIV/AIDS at the end of the twentieth century. The value of such an enterprise is made explicit, I believe, through detailed consideration of the following statement, taken from *Powers of Horror*: “It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.”<sup>9</sup> Identity and borders, ambiguity and interstices: arguably the utmost of abjection, inarguably the backbone of both twentieth century Latino/a studies and HIV/AIDS discourse. Through close analysis of cultural production produced by gay Latinos, including Sandoval-Sánchez, Mexican scholar and writer Pedro Bustos Aguilar, Chicano author Arturo Islas, and Chicano avant-garde performance group Asco, this chapter positions abjection as both a destructive and constructive affective response contouring gay Latino identities.

For critics such as Thomas Yingling and Jeffrey Weeks, AIDS is *the* disease that hails the end of identity at the close of the twentieth century.<sup>10</sup> “It is not desire that is in question,” Yingling argues, “but identity: the whole problem of a disappearing body, of a body quite literally shitting itself away. That is AIDS.”<sup>11</sup> HIV/AIDS works to undermine facile notions of identity and identification precisely because it has, from the beginning, been constructed as an indistinct, ambiguously positioned threat, as a virus emanating from the societal realm – that “exorbitant outside,” a place of excess – but also as a malignancy growing from within, as matter which engenders exclusion yet solicits identification. This blurring of origins is crucial to the arrival of the abject; when asked in an interview of 1980 to translate the gist of *l’abjection* for an English audience, Kristeva responded: “[it is] an extremely strong feeling that is at once somatic and symbolic, which is above all a revolt against an external menace from which one wants to distance oneself, but of which one has the impression that it may menace us *from the inside*.”<sup>12</sup>

The devastating corporeal effects of the epidemic, and its propensity to dehumanise those afflicted, invoking bestial images and rhetoric of forlorn, emaciated “victims,” meant that it became invested with the symbolic power to change identity, to render identity fragile and even ridiculous. Whilst it worked to highlight the seams that keep monolithic identities constructed and in their appropriate places, it also worked to dissolve these

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<sup>9</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4.

<sup>10</sup> Jeffrey Weeks argued that the shock of AIDS equated to the shock of identity and the arrival of postmodernism at the end of the twentieth century. See Weeks, ‘Post-Modern AIDS?’ *Ecstatic Antibodies: Resisting the AIDS Mythology*, ed. Tessa Boffin and Sunil Gupta (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1990).

<sup>11</sup> Thomas E. Yingling, *AIDS and the National Body* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997), 16.

<sup>12</sup> Julia Kristeva, Interview with Elaine Hoffman Baruch, ‘Feminism and Psychoanalysis,’ *Julia Kristeva, Interviews*, ed. Ross Mitchell Guberman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 118: emphasis added.

stitches. “I want to write about KS,” gay, African-American student and aspiring author Gary Fisher wrote in his journal, “I haven’t really written about what I look like now. *I have a new skin. I have a new identity.* They are not the same, but they do on occasion converge, even eclipse one another.”<sup>13</sup> The impact that Kaposi Sarcoma (KS) has of Fisher’s body, the purple-brown lesions actually staining his dark *skin*, the most conspicuous marker of racial identity, is encoded as a transformation, a malady that actually disfigures and displaces previous identifications.

Conversely, some cultural producers chose instead to align themselves with the virus in this period. In *Fast Trip, Long Drop* (1993), a video response to the early years of the epidemic, Gregg Bordowitz, ACT UP/New York activist, fledgling member of ACT UP affinity group Damned Interfering Video Activists Television (DIVA TV) and co-founder of the video activist collective Testing the Limits, bluntly parodies such identification with HIV. In a staged interview – bearing the platitude ‘Thriving with AIDS’ – between Alter Allesman (Bordowitz’s grim alter ego) and the cheery, patronising presenter Henry Roth, played by Bob Huff, Allesman acerbically verbalises affinity with his virus: “I’m sick and I don’t want a cure. I like my illness. It’s just as much a part of me as my other characteristics. I *identify* as my illness.”<sup>14</sup>

Undoubtedly HIV/AIDS pushed the envelope of the human condition at this time; as Yingling passionately elucidates, it was mobilised as a signifier through which America came to understand “the cancer of being, the oncology of ontology.”<sup>15</sup> For Yingling, the projection of AIDS as an ambiguous object – comparable with Kristeva’s description of the abject as that which is “Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A ‘something’ that I do not recognize as a thing”<sup>16</sup> – not only acts to threaten “our being” (although this homogenising gesture is somewhat problematic), it simultaneously announces that “we are moving towards non-being, indeed are already inscribed with it, in it.”<sup>17</sup> Like the analogy of the corpse in Kristeva’s essay – represented as the “most sickening of wastes,”<sup>18</sup> “a border that has encroached upon everything,”<sup>19</sup> “something rejected from which one does not part,”<sup>20</sup> and the ubiquitous frontier beyond which death infects life – AIDS represented

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<sup>13</sup> Gary Fisher, *Gary in your Pocket: Stories and Notebooks of Gary Fisher*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), 271: emphasis added. *Gary in Your Pocket* is a collection of the previously unpublished works and journals of Gary Fisher, compiled by Sedgwick, his close friend and teacher, in 1996, two years after his death from AIDS.

<sup>14</sup> *Fast Trip, Long Drop*, dir. Gregg Bordowitz, Video Data Bank, 1993.

<sup>15</sup> Yingling, *AIDS and the National Body*, 15.

<sup>16</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 2.

<sup>17</sup> Yingling, *AIDS and the National Body*, 15.

<sup>18</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 3.

<sup>19</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 3.

<sup>20</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4.

in its formative years the other side of the border, the moment when the spectre of death emerges to haunt the living. But now this harbinger resides in the very flesh and blood of the infected subject; the body with AIDS becomes a repository which already houses the corpse, the “utmost of abjection.”<sup>21</sup>

To understand gay Latinos with HIV as repulsive, as figures that require separation through abjection, Sara Ahmed’s rendering of mobile “affective economies,” an accumulation of affect which functions through relationality, the “sticky associations between signs, figures, and objects,”<sup>22</sup> is invaluable. She declares: “emotionality involves movements or associations whereby ‘feelings’ take us across different levels of signification, not all of which can be admitted in the present.”<sup>23</sup> Indeed early HIV/AIDS discourse insisted that this new epidemic only emerged comprehensively as a chain of signification. Behind each act of violence against those who have contracted HIV, Leo Bersani posits in the foundational essay ‘Is the Rectum a Grave?’ (1987), unconsciously lurks “the infinitely more seductive and intolerable image of a grown [white?] man, legs high in the air, unable to refuse the suicidal ecstasy of being a woman.”<sup>24</sup> As Bersani argues, even HIV contracted through blood transfusions (the most recognisable form of blood-mixing) had gay sex as the grim instigator. In the equally influential essay ‘The Spectacle of AIDS,’ Simon Watney demonstrates that rhetoric of “African AIDS” rested upon deep-rooted racist and colonialist myths, where discourses of “promiscuous” mixing expand “to incorporate the entire African subcontinent and beyond, recharging ‘the orient’ with a deadly cargo of exoticism that reminds ‘us’ that negritude has always been, for whites, a sign of sexual excess and death.”<sup>25</sup>

Building upon this, I argue that slipping across the slick surface of the figurative brown-skinned Latino/a body is centuries of anxiety-provoking rhetoric over the danger of interracial desire, played out through the historical mingling of “pure” European blood and “dirty” indigenous blood. For Ahmed, viewing these feelings of anxiety as affective economies (rather than as a brand of commodity fetishism which hinge emotions to constitutive objects) allows for the illumination of previously concealed histories, whilst revealing the ways in which emotions are constructed by networks of association. Indebted to Ahmed’s reading of affective economies I propose that a discussion of abjection in North America derives its appeal through its *contingency*, its rootedness in other narratives

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<sup>21</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4.

<sup>22</sup> Sara Ahmed, ‘Affective Economies,’ *Social Text* 79, vol. 22, no. 2, Summer 2004, 117-139, 120.

<sup>23</sup> Ahmed, ‘Affective Economies,’ 120.

<sup>24</sup> Leo Bersani, ‘Is the Rectum a Grave?’ [1987], *Is the Rectum a Grave? and Other Essays* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 18.

<sup>25</sup> Watney, ‘The Spectacle of AIDS,’ 74.

of disgust and exclusion. By employing abjection as a discursive anchor I wish to illuminate how narratives of exclusion cascade between the (perpetually maligned and objectified) figures of “the Latino,” “the homosexual,” and “the HIV/AIDS victim,” to fabricate an assemblage of resemblance in which feelings of disgust circulate through the mutual adherence of these figures.<sup>26</sup> Affective economies, tracing the ways in which bodies relate to each other via the circulation of emotion, simultaneously chime with my rendering of viral mestizaje, as expounded in the thesis introduction.

In deference to Kristeva’s vision of abjection I have divided this chapter into two sections, addressed in broad terms to border identities and racial ambiguity. Both these areas of inquiry are essential to any discussion of abjection as experienced by Latino communities responding to HIV/AIDS. It is clear that HIV/AIDS has engendered anxiety precisely because it disrespects borders; as William Haver notes, HIV “is the first true cosmopolitan, respecting neither geographic, cultural, sexual, class, nor racial boundaries.”<sup>27</sup> In the 1980s and 90s, all those identities perceived as marginal – migrants, African-American MSM having sex on the “down low,” hustlers, homeless – were deemed “high risk,” conceptualised as acute vectors of transmission due to their very itinerancy and positioning outside of simplistic identity models. Discussions of limits and boundaries even pervaded immune health rhetoric; whilst the functional immune system was represented as an embodied sieve, sifting “the host” from “the parasite,” separating the valuable “us” from the toxic “them” – for as Alphonso Lingis contends, “Macrophages in our bloodstream hunt and devour trillions of bacteria and viruses entering our porous bodies continually: they are the agents that maintain our borders”<sup>28</sup> – HIV as a retrovirus was seen to scramble immunological memory, causing the immune system to relinquish its once preciously guarded borders.

However, separating borderland scholarship from questions of racial identity is precarious and difficult. These discursive tracts are intricately interrelated, and whilst *clarity* of thought is necessary, *purity* of thought is anathema. As Dean asserts, purity is “an enemy of the intellect.”<sup>29</sup> With her customary eloquence, Gloria Anzaldúa delves into this dilemma, enunciating the impossibility of separating race from space, the angst of being constantly defined in relation to arbitrary borders, and the courage of claiming those same borders as home:

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<sup>26</sup> Ahmed, ‘Affective Economies,’ 119.

<sup>27</sup> William Haver, *The Body of This Death: Historicity and Sociality in the Time of AIDS* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

<sup>28</sup> Alphonso Lingis, *Dangerous Emotions* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 27.

<sup>29</sup> Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, 5.

To live in the Borderlands means you  
are neither *hispana indígena negra española*  
*ni gabacha, eres mestiza, mulata*, half breed  
caught in the crossfire between camps  
while carrying all five races on your back  
not knowing which side to run to, run from;

*Cuando vives en la frontera*  
people walk through you, the wind steals your voice,  
you're a *burra*, buey, scapegoat,  
forerunner of a new race,  
half and half – both woman and man, neither –  
a new gender;

In the Borderlands  
you are the battleground  
where enemies are kin to each other;  
you are at home, a stranger,  
the border disputes have been settled  
the volley of shots have shattered the truce  
you are wounded, lost in action  
dead, fighting back;

To survive the Borderlands  
you must live *sin fronteras*<sup>30</sup>

Although Anzaldúa penned this poem in 1987, her acknowledgment that Latino/as identify (problematically) across frenetic racial (and sexual) lines is still valid. Indeed the 2000 U.S. Federal Census revealed that most self-proclaimed Latino/as and Hispanics eschewed identification with any of the five official categories of race, citing that they fell somewhere beyond or between these limited (and limiting) classifications. As an ethnic rather than racial designation, Latino/a identity becomes refracted across and between the (arbitrary) borders drawn around race. For Anzaldúa, this constitutes more than just a refusal to acquiesce to false racial taxonomies formulated by dominant modes of discourse, sanctioned and maintained by the Federal government of the United States; to live outside of these systems, to live (rather than merely survive) *sin fronteras*, without borders, is a feat of self-determination for those hybrid subjects occupying the margins, the figural and literal borderlands, of American society.

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<sup>30</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 216-217.

## **“What does not respect borders, positions, rules”**

This chapter argues that abjection, as a mechanism that entreats separation to protect the “I,” becomes a pertinent affective response contouring the lived experiences of marginalised groups in the West. From the outset of *Powers of Horror* Kristeva makes one point painstakingly clear: “The abject has only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to I.”<sup>31</sup> Thus, as Ahmed argues:

the abject is never about an object that appears before the subject; the abject does not reside in an object, as either its quality or matter. Rather objects become abject only insofar as they threaten the identity of the “subject,” of “who I am” or “who we are.” As such, the border object “stands in for” the threat of the “not” to the “I” or the threat that the “I” might become the “not.”<sup>32</sup>

Abjection, in the Kristevan sense, has everything to do with exclusion, with maintaining separation between “I” and that matter “I” perceive as dirty or dangerous via the erection of nevertheless permeable borders; this proximity of self and other generates intense affective responses for it suggests the possibility of a permanent parasitic relationship, the possibility that “I” may never be able to cast off the object whose very existence constitutes me as a subject.

As it has emerged in postmodern critique, abjection represents a powerful frisson of dissent, for it also names the slippage across the (always unstable) boundaries that keep toxic binaries in place, binaries which elevate and privilege the “I” (white, male, heterosexual, able-bodied subjects, for example) by excluding and stigmatising its counterpart, the “not I” (coloured, female, homosexual, disabled). Certainly abjection has been fundamental to queer inquiry; for gay men, “abjection continues to be [a] dirty secret.”<sup>33</sup> As Diana Fuss contends in a seminal early work of queer theory, this is because the opposition between heterosexuality and homosexuality has rested upon the

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<sup>31</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 1.

<sup>32</sup> Sara Ahmed, ‘The Skin of the Community: Affect and Boundary Formation,’ *Revolt, Affect, Collectivity: The Unstable Boundaries of Kristeva’s Polis*, ed. Tina Chanter and Ewa Plonowska Ziarek (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 103.

<sup>33</sup> Michael Warner, ‘Unsafe: Why Gay Men Are Having Risky Sex’ (Afterword) in David M. Halperin, *What Do Gay Men Want?: An Essay on Sex, Risk, and Subjectivity* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 163. In this extended essay Halperin insists that abjection is primarily a legacy of queer theorising rather than a mainstay of psychoanalytic discourse: “Abjection does not originate in psychoanalysis, and it has little basis in it [...] It is queer.” See Halperin, *What Do Gay Men Want?*, 70.

Judith Butler calls for the politicisation of abjection as an “exclusionary matrix” which designates “those ‘unlivable’ and ‘uninhabitable’ zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the ‘unlivable’ is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject.” See Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* [1993] (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), xiii.



intelligibility of an inside/outside dialectic, the “inevitability of a symbolic order based on a logic of limits, margins, borders, and boundaries.”<sup>34</sup> But just as Kristeva argues that the ejected object – rendered the abject object through this exclusion – remains to haunt the subject, validating the subject as a non-object, the “I” is brought into being in relation to the “not.” Bersani, for example, ascertains that historically “the homosexual” has been “the invention *necessary* to keep the always shaky construction of heterosexuality intact.”<sup>35</sup>

To apply this theory of abjection to race relations in America, feelings of disgust generated towards the “coloured” body (which Ahmed argues already stands in for dirt,<sup>36</sup> a substance which in actuality is only ever, to quote anthropologist Mary Douglas, “matter out of place”<sup>37</sup>) works to maintain (and by maintaining, reconfirming the presumed necessity of) the boundaries of the white body. As prominent queer-of-colour theorist Robert Reid-Pharr asserts, “the black has been conceptualized in modern (slave) culture as an inchoate, irrational nonsubject, as the chaos that both defines and threatens the borders of logic, individuality, basic subjectivity.”<sup>38</sup> Here “the black” becomes established as the denigrated underside of the black/white binary, a juxtaposition which structures race in the U.S. as a dualism *and* as a hierarchy.

However, I contend that “the brown body” has emerged as an indicator of racial mixture and racial ambiguity, unintelligible in America’s black/white dichotomy. Therefore, feelings of disgust ostensibly conjured by brown, and indeed browned, bodies may stem from the acknowledgment that through their very existence, brown bodies index the disintegration of the borders that stand between the “I” and the “not,” between whiteness and what is not white. In a racist imaginary, the brown body exists as corporeal proof that the “dominant” white culture has already become the other. To take this further, if “blackness,” and I would add “brownness,” has historically functioned as a sepulchre, as Franz Fanon asserts in the influential *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), for Western society’s fears over excessive sexuality (and thus fears over the permeability of the white male ego), then homosexuality has been stigmatised as the epitome of abjection, maligned as a border identity constructed in deference to regimes of sexual normativity in white and black culture alike. “To strike the homosexual, the scapegoat, the sign of chaos and crisis,”

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<sup>34</sup> Diana Fuss (ed.), ‘Inside/Out,’ *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 1.

<sup>35</sup> Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 36: emphasis added.

<sup>36</sup> Ahmed, ‘The Skin of the Community,’ 103.

<sup>37</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* [1966] (London: Routledge, 1995), 36.

<sup>38</sup> Robert Reid-Pharr, *Black Gay Man: Essays* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 103. For a convincing account of the ways in which abjection has been positioned in relation to blackness, queerness, and masculinity see Darieck Scott, *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2010).

Reid-Pharr elucidates, “is to return the [black] community to normality, to create boundaries around blackness, rights that white men are obliged to recognize.”<sup>39</sup>

In a similar fashion, feelings of disgust directed towards people who have contracted HIV or developed AIDS function to shore up the boundaries of the “healthy” body, which in turn renders all those who allow their bodies to be penetrated, to become porous, leaky, and indiscrete (namely intravenous drug users, women, and homosexual men) in diametric opposition to a hegemonic, heterosexual, male “I.” Tim Dean notes that “[b]y persistently representing itself as having a ‘general population’ that remains largely immune to incidence of AIDS, the United States pushes AIDS – and the social groups seen as representing AIDS – to the outside of its psychic and social economies, treating them exactly like shit,”<sup>40</sup> as matter that must be disposed of. I contend that “the homosexual,” “the raced body,” and “the person with AIDS” become positioned in a troubling economy of conflation in this period, for as Sandoval-Sánchez observes:

Threatening to contaminate the symbolic order, undoing cultural taboos around the body, and putting at risk all systems of cultural order and logic, people of color, homosexuals, people living with AIDS, and migrants in the US must be kept at bay and relegated to the margins just as bodily fluids, secretions, and waste are repelled. *Once expelled* from the national body politic, the unclean and improper Other is *translated* as an alien, as a monster, an excess or lack that provokes disgust, anxiety, horror, and fear.<sup>41</sup>

As Sandoval-Sánchez hints, abjection is not an innate feature of an object, but rather a *consequence* of boundary-setting; matter becomes translated as abject object once it transgresses the arbitrary lines constructed to demarcate the frontiers of the proper subject or the proper state. The act of translation itself implies the conversion of that which is familiar into that which is foreign. Abjection, as a surge of disgust or fear, becomes a visceral safety valve which protects against the destruction of the subject via the erection of borders, which works to re-establish a “healthy” separation between the subject and that matter which, Kristeva asserts

I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border [...] dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Reid-Pharr, *Black Gay Man*, 104.

<sup>40</sup> Tim Dean, *Beyond Sexuality* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 99.

<sup>41</sup> Sandoval-Sánchez, ‘Politicizing Abjection,’ 548: emphasis added.

<sup>42</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 3.

Once expelled – abject literally means to “throw away” or “cast off” – this matter becomes conceptualised as an object, removed from its corresponding subject. Transformed as it moves beyond the boundaries of the subject, the abjected other is nevertheless an intimate bedfellow, interpellated as undeniably servile and repulsive, in Kristeva’s analogy, yet necessary, matter which “does not cease challenging its master.”<sup>43</sup>

Bodily fluids, defilement, and shit (tinged with repulsion) are merely effects of the construction of borders, implicated as matter which transforms as it transgresses; certainly “filth is not a quality in itself,” Kristeva ascertains, “but applies to what relates to a boundary.”<sup>44</sup> Shit becomes translated as fetid waste which betrays our intimacy with decay, which stands for the dangers emanating from our porous bodies. As Judith Butler surmises in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) any clear boundary between the interior and the exterior of the body is undermined by excretory passages which allow the “inner” to “become” the outer and what was once assimilated (food, for instance) to become permanently excluded. Shit provokes horror as a substance that was once part of the body, which was once *vital*, but which has metamorphosed into something rotten and toxic, something that must be permanently (r)ejected, yet something that will never fully desert us. Following Douglas’s claim that “the body is a model that can stand for any bounded system,”<sup>45</sup> Butler contends that the body’s excreting function becomes the model for processes of identity differentiation: “In effect, this is the mode by which Others become shit.”<sup>46</sup>

To ruminate on shit becomes a productive enterprise when examining the effects of HIV/AIDS in the early years of the epidemic. In 1988, George Whitmore, a member of the path-breaking New York based gay male literary collective, The Violet Quill, wrote that the representation of AIDS as a “gentle, Camille-like wasting away” was grossly erroneous. AIDS, he bluntly asserted, “is about shit and blood.”<sup>47</sup> AIDS became the syndrome that most viscerally brought these two substances into contact. Certainly the

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<sup>43</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 2.

<sup>44</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 69.

<sup>45</sup> Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 115.

<sup>46</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* [1990] (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 182.

This is an interesting analogy and can be widely applied. For example, just as food is ingested as necessity only to be excreted as waste, so migrants in America are often incorporated into the nation-state as a source of cheap labour only to be transformed into scapegoats, positioned as a drain on national resources, and forcibly ejected.

<sup>47</sup> George Whitmore, *Someone Was Here: Profiles in the AIDS Epidemic* (New York: Nal Books, 1988), 24. This slippage between shit and blood also surfaced in medical proscriptions against acts such as rimming and fisting. Acts which opened up the anus threatened to produce co-infections, such as that of hepatitis and HIV.

arrival of AIDS provoked a confrontation with the body as a dysfunctional entity, as a compromised envelope which allows interior matter – namely vomit, excrement, and blood – to become external. Yet for people of colour grappling with this epidemic, Whitmore’s analogy is both astute and a false taxonomy. Indeed it may be more pertinent to ask how AIDS can be conceptualised for those populations whose very blood (or rather the rhetorical infrastructures that construct “blood” as the subject of race-based discourse) has already been perceived of *as* shit, as dirty, tainted, contaminating, and disgusting, as a substance that continuously threatens to destabilise the solidity and purity of the subject, the pure (read white) body at the heart of the American dream. In this sense bodies with AIDS are hailed as repellent because they tap into complex economies of association: economies that decree that diseased bodies are inherently dirty, that blood should not be mixed, which in turn references networks of shifting anxiety pertaining to sexual immoderation and miscegenation. For Kristeva, abjection is always contingent, finding its meaning in both what the abject object *is* and (perhaps more significantly) what it is *not*. Shit and blood become abject only to the extent that they stand in for *something else*; as Kristeva argues “excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.) *stand for* the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death.”<sup>48</sup>

Nowhere is the interaction of shit, blood, and identity politics more palpable than in the life and works of gay Chicano author, Arturo Islas. Noted for his novels depicting rural family life on the U.S.-Mexico border – *The Rain God* (1984), *Migrant Souls* (1990), and the posthumously published *La Mollie and the King of Tears* (1996) – Islas had, from a young age, battled physical malady and decline. He had grappled with polio, ulcerative colitis, which had resulted in an operation to fit a colostomy bag in 1969, alcoholism, S/M-style bodily mutilation, and finally HIV/AIDS, which claimed his life in 1991. In a poem written in the late 70s, part of the underexamined Islas archive, he contemplates his dependence on the artificial anus gouged into his stomach, which he wryly dubbed his “stinky-rose,”<sup>49</sup> and the accompanying “scat bag” plastered to his side, spontaneously filling with faeces throughout the day:

You are my connection  
I change you seven times a day  
Fragrant, red mouth at my side

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<sup>48</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 71: emphasis added.

<sup>49</sup> Frederick Luis Aldama, *Dancing With Ghosts: A Critical Biography of Arturo Islas* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 112.

Surrounded encased in plastic  
You remind me relentlessly of my  
mortality  
What shall I do with this constant ooze?<sup>50</sup>

Already ostracised on account of his sexuality and racial identity Islas had to adjust to a life of routine incontinence and muted sexual expression. A self-styled bottom, Islas despised his defunct anus, now sutured and impenetrable; he loathed his colostomy bag, a prosthesis which ensured the functionality of his gay body, but foreclosed his functionality as a gay man seeking anal penetration. As Frederick Luis Aldama notes, “a body without a rectum, a body forever dependent on a ‘shit bag’ was a literal manifestation of what Islas already felt as a gay man in a world that taught him to imagine his body as unsanitary and his rectum as the ultimate source of shame” and, it should be added, pleasure.<sup>51</sup>

I wish to extend a different interpretation of this poem which reads across Islas’s vast archive of writing. Drafted in 1975, ‘Reason’s Mirror and the Education of Miguel Angel’ is an early version of the manuscript *American Dreams and Fantasies* which would later be dramatically revised to form a chapter of Islas’s first novel, *The Rain God*. In this short extract Miguel Chico Angel – the closeted protagonist of *The Rain God* and *Migrant Souls* who, as José Esteban Muñoz argues, is Islas’s “thinly camouflaged authorial surrogate”<sup>52</sup> – describes a terrifying dream:

The monster in Mamá Chona’s womb was now in Miguel Chico’s presence. “I am a nice monster,” it said to him softly, “come into my cave.”

The two of them were standing on a bridge, facing the incoming fog. The monster held him closely from behind and whispered into his ear in a relentless, singsong manner. “I am the manipulator and the manipulated.” It put its velvet paw in Miguel’s hand and forced him to hold it tightly against his gut. [...] Miguel wanted to escape but could not. The monster’s breath smelled of fresh blood and feces. “You are in my caves, and you will do whatever I tell you to do.” It moved away from him. Miguel Chico continued to feel its form pressed tightly against him, and the odor of its breath lingered, forcing Miguel to gasp and struggle for air.<sup>53</sup>

The anthropomorphised monster represents the dysfunctional body in all its myriad variations; it is the grotesque consequence of an ailing, an inadequate, and (most

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<sup>50</sup> Arturo Islas, ‘Scat Bag’ [c. 1977], *Arturo Islas: The Uncollected Works*, ed. Frederick Luis Aldama (Houston: Arte Público Press, 2003), 141.

<sup>51</sup> Aldama, *Dancing With Ghosts*, 113.

<sup>52</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 32.

<sup>53</sup> Arturo Islas, ‘Reason’s Mirror and the Education of Miguel Angel’ [1975], *Arturo Islas: The Uncollected Works*, 49-50.

importantly) a gendered and sexual form. In the closing pages of *The Rain God* Miguel Chico witnesses the death of his grandmother Mama Chona, the ubiquitous matriarch of the Angel clan. Fighting a slow decline into dementia, the fiery Mama Chona confronts her decaying female body which has now turned against her. Days before her death she begins to notice “something unnatural coming out of her womb,” the distended muscles of her prolapsed uterus which she nevertheless perceives as a monstrous, deformed foetus, contemptuously viewing it as “another worthless creature” wrenched from her body.<sup>54</sup>

The monster is also a manifestation of Islas’s corporeal fragility, for, like Islas, Miguel Chico has been fitted with a colostomy bag. The monster is not the bag itself – “the fetid human body packaged for the twentieth century”<sup>55</sup> – but the space where the bag meets the body, the space of a tentative “connection [...] encased in plastic.” Certainly the monster makes contact with Miguel at the point on his gut where the bag is attached, the point where the plastic appliance has wrenched open his flesh, the point where, as is the case for Mama Chona, the inside has become the outside. The “cave” that the monster entreats him to enter is simultaneously the hole carved into his side, the artificial anus which is now a corporeal cul-de-sac, an abject dead-end, and the progeny of Mama Chona’s womb, a symbol of a diseased familial legacy. Now the monster opens its “fragrant red mouth,” belching breath which smells of “blood and feces,” forcing the protagonist to gag and turn away from his own repellent body. The monster becomes the very space where blood and shit interact, where the flow of blood is transformed into the ooze of faeces. That the opening remains red and fragrant with the smell of *fresh* blood suggests that these substances continue to meet and mingle at the margins of the compromised body. Blood for Mama Chona signifies as both the failure of the female form, and as a substance which indexes a fearful fecundity; blood for Miguel Chico is intimately linked to shit (material which should not mix within the functional body), morphing seamlessly from an essential fluid to waste matter. Blood, which may stand-in for his familial ties and his Mexican heritage, now merges with his shit, perpetually conjoined by the plastic tube, the prosthetic, mass-produced anus.

But there is another way in which Latino/a blood comes to be analogised as shit: its ability to transgress boundaries, to move beyond the closed envelope of the body. Indeed mestizaje has developed to name the dissemination of blood across national borders. Shit only becomes interpellated as repellent once it has passed beyond the boundaries of the body; thus it is the transgression of the border which provokes anxiety. This movement

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<sup>54</sup> Arturo Islas, *The Rain God* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1984), 174.

<sup>55</sup> Islas, ‘Scat Bag,’ 141.

across arbitrary lines extends to other bodily fluids; as Kristeva suggests, bodily fluids are lambasted because they signify as matter out-of-place: “it is *flow* that is impure. Any secretion or discharge, anything that leaks out of the feminine or masculine body defiles.”<sup>56</sup> Shit and other bodily fluids are not in and of themselves loathsome and polluting; rather it is their propensity to move, to flow, which is maligned. In a similar fashion, Latino/as often appear as transgressive figures constructed by the unrestricted mingling of bloodlines, posited as fleshy evidence that interracial sexual exchange, historically a taboo in the U.S., has occurred; if the flow of bodily fluids is unseemly, the flow of bodily fluids between racially-discordant bodies is anathema. Kristeva hints at this in *Powers of Horror*; grappling with *Leviticus* she declares: “The pure will be that which conforms to an established taxonomy; the impure, that which unsettles it, establishes intermixture and disorder [...] the impure will be those that do not confine themselves to one element but point to admixture and confusion.”<sup>57</sup> Certainly blood purity, as a concept that endorses racial segregation, imagines identity without admixture, identity promulgating via “the exclusion of anything that breaks boundaries (flow, drain, discharge).”<sup>58</sup> Latino/as, signifying across the “established taxonomy” of racial classification, become aligned with impurity; later in this chapter I discuss this conflation further in relation to “brown(ed)” aesthetics. Returning to Whitmore’s analogy, whilst shit-and-blood maintains a sense of separation, positioning AIDS as an enumeration of symptoms, blood-as-shit positions AIDS as a conflation, as a syndrome which reaches understandability as a chain of signifiers, as meaning transmitted from somewhere else.

Aligning Latino identity with shit and the transgression of boundaries cannot be merely an exercise in bigotry or an exploration of a monstrous corporeality; for avant-garde performance troupe Asco (the Spanish vernacular for disgust, revulsion, or nausea), signifying as matter excreted from the evolving landscape of Los Angeles constituted a searing critique of the social conditions of the city’s Chicano/a residents. According to C. Ondine Chavoya, a scholar of the ephemeral Asco archive, in their unending quest to establish a brown aesthetics of urban space, Asco assigned themselves the role of municipal (un)officials for East L.A., conducting tours and unscheduled surveys of the industrialised landscape before “designating various spaces and objects to be civic

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<sup>56</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 102: emphasis added. It is important to note that when Kristeva decries flow as impure she is paraphrasing *Leviticus*; she is not extending her own reading of flow.

<sup>57</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 98.

<sup>58</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 103.

landmarks, monuments, and preservation zones.”<sup>59</sup> One ceremoniously certified site of cultural significance was an unassuming storm drain, the excretory organ of the coastal metropolis. Captured in the form of a motion picture still, in keeping with their unique strategy of “No Movie” making,<sup>60</sup> *Asshole Mural* is comprised of a series of photographs (taken by Harry Gamboa Jr.) in which Glugio Nicandro (a.k.a. Gronk), Willie Herrón, Patti Valdez, and satellite Asco member Humberto Sandoval elegantly pose to camera beside the cavernous pipe of a large open sewer, the men spiffy in suits and shades, Valdez chic in a strapless white ensemble with matching jewellery. In stark contrast, the landscape is a barren wasteland: the drain oozes discoloured water, staining the block of concrete which encases it with dark brown; faecal-like debris dribbles into a depleted river, which froths with the glut of discarded rubbish [Figure 1]. In this pre-AIDS moment Asco were commenting on the conflation of Chicano/as with contamination and expulsion; they positioned their own bodies as fetid waste matter defined in relation to the porosity of the multiethnic city. They stand beside a gaping orifice, metaphorically excreted from the bowels of the national body yet physically entrenched within the city’s borders; they straddle the boundary (literally; in one photo Valdez is seen mounting the drain, flanked by her male counterparts), they remain simultaneously internal and external. In an act of quiet defiance, they claim the abject conduit as a memorial, a place of absence made present. They proudly inhabit the role of abject Other, they identify with life’s shit, the matter that has been pushed aside.

For Asco, and indeed for a vast array of Latino/a scholars working on borderland aesthetics, this ejection from the national body politic centralises the role of border systems (and the attendant legal and political relations of power) in the creation of the unclean and improper Other. “Latino/a” has not been levied to merely name a racial or ethnic category, or signify an identity fashioned in the shadow of European conquest and American imperialism. Unlike the term “Hispanic,” which various critics argue functions as an inaccurate label devised by the Richard Nixon administration and imposed by the Census Bureau, and as a salacious signifier wielded by large corporations to capitalise on ‘The Decade of the Hispanic,’ Latino/a also indexes ever changing and adapting movements,

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<sup>59</sup> C. Ondine Chavoya, ‘Internal Exiles: The Interventionist Public and Performance Art of Asco,’ *Space, Site, Intervention: Situating Installation Art*, ed. Erika Suderberg (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 198.

<sup>60</sup> Max Benavidez writes: “Often circulated in a series of press kits and production stills, the No Movies’ enigmatic imagery and evocative titles referred to nonexistent films while constructing the group as media celebrities. Commenting upon the contentious relationship between Chicanos and the mainstream media, the photographs simultaneously denied and affirmed the viability of an alternative cinema, satirizing emergent Chicano film practices that transferred the didactic nationalism of murals to a new medium.” See Benavidez, *Gronk* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 45.



traversals, gestures, interconnections, and intimacies, those affective flows that come to define life on the margins.<sup>61</sup> Arguably, it is this continuous mobility, this constant transition and transgression of (both material and metaphorical) bounded structures and interstitial spaces that contours the construction of a cogent field of Latina/o studies at the end of the twentieth century. Borders and border-crossing were certainly refocused in the academic spotlight after the arrival of Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* in 1987 and have remained a savvy and popular source of intellectual engagement.<sup>62</sup> If, as Kristeva claims, abjection names that which does not respect borders, Latino/as, as the most visible (and maligned) crossers of borders in the U.S., often become engendered as the epitome of abjection.

The dictionary tells us that "abject" names a state of being hopeless, miserable, humiliated, servile, and wretched. Whilst these connotations cannot (and should not) be expunged, the aspect of abjection which becomes most pertinent for this project is abjection as a mechanism of exclusion. Exclusion haunts queer Latino/a identity in the U.S. As an ethnic group Latino/as have perpetually been positioned as outsiders, as subjects coming from somewhere else, even when U.S. military aggressors annexed large portions of Mexico in the nineteenth century; this intensified in the twentieth century with the implementation of strict immigration laws. Despite the reality that a significant amount of Latino/a citizens have inhabited American soil for centuries, well before the arrival of the Founding Fathers, that their Indian ancestors were indigenous to the continent, and that their incorporation into the U.S. has often been a result of colonialism or to supply a demand for cheap labour, whole Latino/a groups (whether they are citizens or immigrants) have been conflated with deviance and illegality.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> A prime example of the egregious appropriation of "Hispanic" is the debacle surrounding advertisements for the Coors Brewery Company. Despite being boycotted by Chicano/as in the 1960s because of their racist hiring practices, Coors began to use the word Hispanic in their advertisements to push their product in this exploding demographic. Frank del Olmo, a columnist for the Los Angeles Times in the 1980s and 90s (a publication that championed the term Latino/a), asked: "why did otherwise respected Latino leaders have to become shills by seeming to declare Coors the 'official' Latino beer?" See del Olmo, 'Latino Leaders Should Decide Who Has Claim to Their Allegiance,' *Los Angeles Times*, October 22<sup>nd</sup> 1989. [http://articles.latimes.com/1989-10-22/opinion/op-723\\_1\\_latino-group](http://articles.latimes.com/1989-10-22/opinion/op-723_1_latino-group). Accessed March 3rd 2014.

<sup>62</sup> See Carl Gutiérrez-Jones, 'Desiring B/orders,' *Diacritics* 25, no. 1 (1995); José David Saldívar, *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997); José David Saldívar and Hector Calderón, *Criticism in the Borderlands: Studies in Chicano Literature, Culture, and Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991); Sonia Saldívar-Hull, *Feminism on the Border: Chicana Gender Politics and Literature* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000); C. Alejandra Elenas, *Transforming Borders: Chicana/o Culture and Pedagogy* (Lanham: Lexington, 2011).

Borders have also served as creative fodder for a vast array of twentieth-century Latino/a cultural producers, such as prominent writers Américo Paredes and John Rechy and performance artists Nao Bustamante, Luis Alfaro, Guillermo Gómez-Peña and the Border Arts Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo and Ricardo Dominguez's Electronic Disturbance Theater.

<sup>63</sup> Anthropologist Renato Rosaldo writes: "By a psychological and cultural mechanism of association all Latinos are thus declared to have a blemish that brands us with the stigma of being outside the law. We always live with the mark indicating that whether or not we belong in this country is always in question." See

In *Extinct Lands, Temporal Geographies: Chicana Literature and the Urgency of Space* (2002) Mary Pat Brady posits the U.S.-Mexico border as an “abjection machine – transforming people into ‘aliens,’ ‘illegals,’ ‘wetbacks,’ or ‘undocumented,’ and thereby rendering them unintelligible (and unintelligent), ontologically impossible, outside the real and the human.”<sup>64</sup> Just as abjection constructs borders (or rather invests existing sites or structures with meaning) in order to delineate a proposed threat to the “I,” so the creation of often arbitrary national boundaries works to produce marginalised groups whose very exclusion delineates them as dangerous or disturbing. The elaborate construction of the Border Patrol thus seeks to both invent identity labels (and in so doing ensure the oppression of all those who assemble under them) whilst attempting to “disarticulate people from the signs of their subjectivity, to deprive them of meaning and identity.”<sup>65</sup> The struggle to survive the alienation of the border is foundational in Anzaldúa’s work. Laying the groundwork for Brady’s analysis she describes the U.S.-Mexico border as a

1, 950 mile-long open wound  
dividing a *pueblo*, a culture,  
running down the length of my body,  
staking fence rods in my flesh,  
splits me      splits me  
*me raja      me raja*<sup>66</sup>

Through the act of writing, Anzaldúa performs a painful splintering of her subjectivity. Cutting into a landscape that was once one vast expanse, the creation of the border performs a painful act of displacement, wrenching her away from (yet placing her beside) people who were once her kin but who have been transformed into strangers. Even her English tongue must be separated from her Spanish tongue; they must follow each other as imperfect reflections. As Kristeva contends, abjection is different from uncanniness, a Freudian concept which denotes something that is strange in its familiarity; abjection is more aggressive, more violent, it is “elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin.”<sup>67</sup> For Anzaldúa, the barrier that keeps this part of herself in perpetual exile is materialised as a stark lacuna on the page, a gaping expanse of absence, *and* as a boundary of whiteness which splits her in two, marking the point of abjection, the point where the subject, through

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Rosaldo, ‘Cultural Citizenship, Inequality, and Multiculturalism,’ *Latino Cultural Citizenship: Claiming Identity, Space, and Rights*, ed. William V. Flores and Rina Benmayor (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 31.

<sup>64</sup> Mary Pat Brady, *Extinct Lands, Temporal Geographies: Chicana Literature and the Urgency of Space* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 50.

<sup>65</sup> Brady, *Extinct Lands*, 53.

<sup>66</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 24.

<sup>67</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 5.

the transgression of borders, becomes the object. Abjection occurs as repressive relations of power, such as colonialism, act upon the solidity of her body and her subjectivity.

This carving up of land reverberates in Anzaldúa's famous proclamation that the border is "*una herida abierta*" (an open wound) "where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country – a border culture."<sup>68</sup> Anzaldúa's description drips with sexualised associations; in Mexican vernacular *raja* translates as gash, or more colloquially, cunt, whilst Anzaldúa also refers to the vulva as an "open wound," a crevice subjected to routine violation, a fissure which allows blood to move beyond the body. The border becomes doubly abject, indexing the splicing of kinship and the ooze of bodily fluids encoded as dirty and repellent. For Anzaldúa, land is intimately linked to bodies; in a 2002 essay she writes: "national boundaries dividing us from the 'others' (nos/otras) are porous and the cracks between worlds serve as gateways."<sup>69</sup> Here the self cannot be contained within the fragile tissue of the body *or* the nation; abjection becomes a necessary affective response to police a structure (the border) which is always already in danger of dissolution.

The transgression of boundaries not only equates to the interpenetration of persons presaging utopian visions of interconnectedness in Anzaldúa's analogy (as I explore later in relation to the work of Cuadros), these "gateways" are simultaneously spaces of pain and humiliation, spaces that render the body (and the nation) vulnerable through proximity and contact. Like the immunologically compromised body, the border becomes a space of hybridity and fluctuation. It is, through the very mixture it provokes, a place of *mestizaje*; in this analogy lands become peoples, as the "third country" which springs from the collision of the First World and the Third indexes the evolution of the "third race," the new hybrid being born from the encounter of Spain and Mexico, a race whose very blood – a substance which Anzaldúa in particular faithfully utilises as a defining indicator of Latino/a race and culture – continuously traverses the border.

Anzaldúa is aligning national borders with blood, bleeding and potential contamination through intimacy. This analogy becomes eerily prescient in the shadow of HIV/AIDS, where sites of bleeding became lambasted as potential vectors of HIV exposure; borders became interpellated as dangerous sites of potential transgression. Indeed Anzaldúa inserts imagery of viral proliferation into her discussion of borders;

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<sup>68</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 25.

<sup>69</sup> Anzaldúa, 'now let us shift,' 561.

“tension,” she insists, “grips the inhabitants of the borderlands *like a virus*.”<sup>70</sup> We may begin to discern the striking homogeneity of borderland scholarship, representations of HIV/AIDS, and the fashioning of emerging queer theoretical fields in the late 80s and early 90s. Through strategies of shoring up and dismantling borders those people, identities, and substances defined by their proximity and relationality to the margins, the edges, the cracks of nations, discourses, or biomedical debate attain the status of the outsider within, the “other” who consistently disrupts the coherency and purity of the “self.”

I propose that it is constructive to merge HIV/AIDS discourse with borderland scholarship, for as Anzaldúa is keen to underline, borderland scholarship can never merely rotate around a fixed site or empirically knowable structure imposed by those wielding power; rather this academic field opens up the borderlands as *potential* spaces of sexual, psychological, and spiritual significance “not particular to the Southwest.”<sup>71</sup> Borderlands, she goes on to assert, “are physically present whenever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy.”<sup>72</sup> If indeed borderlands emerge through the proximity of people and cultures, through regimes of intimacy in which people are able to touch each other across great distances and social divides, then HIV may be seen as the ultimate borderland; not only does viral transmission make patterns of contact (as contagion) visible, it also acts as a hinge, conjoining people through the sharing of viral matter.

Building upon this, Mary Louise Pratt coins the term “contact zones” in her foundational text *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992) to denote improvised, liminal, and imperialist social spaces “where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination.”<sup>73</sup> Thus a “contact zone” is always already a space of contamination, an indistinct site of potential infection masquerading as affection, where to provoke *contact* opens up the potentiality to *contract* (although what is contracted remains ambiguous). For Pratt, “contact” specifically references the processes by which previously separate(d) subjects “*get constituted in and by their relations to each other*.”<sup>74</sup> In this period it is possible to conceptualise HIV infection as a reconfigured contact zone, as a material site where (cultural, racial, gendered, and sexual) bodies come to bear upon each other.

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<sup>70</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 25: emphasis added.

<sup>71</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 19.

<sup>72</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 19.

<sup>73</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), 7.

<sup>74</sup> Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 8: emphasis added.

However, now the pathogen becomes the very means of connection, the microscopic entity that ensures the permanent suturing of multiple bodies across time and space. As Dean suggests, it is possible to imagine HIV as “a putative *object of exchange* [that] allows men to bond with each other.”<sup>75</sup> In a barebacking paradigm, HIV constitutes an indistinct quasi-object (itself an abject rendering) which acts as an intermediary between gay men. This bonding sometimes emulates kinship. I address this further in Chapter Three.

The point of HIV infection becomes an *interface*, defined by Anzaldúa as those “spaces and places where our multiple-surfaced, colored, racially gendered bodies intersect and interconnect,”<sup>76</sup> where fluids evacuated from the bodies of disparate subjects meet, blend, and irrevocably affect said subjects; indeed later in this chapter I utilise the writing of Pedro Bustos Aguilar to show how such interactions contour queer Latino racial identifications in America. That the flow of infected fluids through unprotected sexual intercourse is often engendered by (real, imagined, and fetishised) “asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination” seems self-evident, as the prevailing currency of vernacular such as active/passive, top/bottom, and S/M terminology in gay male culture(s) continues to index. The asymmetrical construction of sexuality is particularly relevant when discussing Latino homosexual; “the *chingón/chingada* (fucker/fucked; active/passive) remains perhaps the most prevalent sociosexual system in Chicano and Latino culture,”<sup>77</sup> David Román insists, whilst Lourdes Arguelles and Manuel Fernández argue that “the nature of the homosexual transaction [in working-class Mexico] is that the act makes one man a machista [masculine, chauvinistic] and the other a cochón [fag].”<sup>78</sup> Certainly HIV, as a “gift” bestowed from one person to another, circulates within asymmetrical economies of giving without reciprocity.

It is clear that the rupturing of physical and illusory borders functions as a salient facet of HIV/AIDS discourse in this period, when the voracious spread of a deadly virus sparked panic over the porosity of certain bodies and bolstered calls for American

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<sup>75</sup> Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, 78; emphasis added. However, it is important to state that Dean discourages any comparison between gay sexual engagement and Pratt’s rendering of contact zones: “When discussing contact with the other in public space, I would not want to mislead readers for whom this phraseology might evoke the notion of “contact zones” that has proved to be so productive in postcolonial studies. Although power relations doubtlessly circumscribe any contact scenario, the kind of contact that I have in mind is not one in which it is possible – much less desirable – to *instrumentalize* the other.” See Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, 207.

<sup>76</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa (ed), ‘Haciendo caras, una entrada,’ *Making Face, Making Soul: Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1990), xvi.

<sup>77</sup> Román, *Acts of Intervention*, 180.

<sup>78</sup> Lourdes Arguelles and Manuel Fernández, ‘Working with *Heterosexismo* in Latino/a Immigrant Los Angeles: Reflections on Community Background, Processes, and Practices,’ *Overcoming Heterosexism and Homophobia: Strategies That Work*, ed. James T. Sears and Walter L. Williams (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 106.

homogeneity and isolation to stave off infection. In California, right-wing politician Lyndon La Rouche even introduced a 1986 ballot measure – Proposition 64 – calling for mandatory HIV testing (which was defeated, 71% to 29%) and raised the possibility of HIV quarantine camps. As John Protevi aptly surmises, “The truth about AIDS is a liminology, a discourse on borders,” peppered with dire warnings that carry no hope of resolution: “keep your fluids to yourself! Don’t bring foreign blood inside!”<sup>79</sup> This rejection of “foreign” blood was taken-up by both the Federal government and mainstream American society. Whilst public health policy was detonated in the 1980s to dissuade the sharing of bodily fluids between people, immigration legislation censored the incorporation of certain bodies into the U.S. The encoding of Africa as the ground zero for AIDS, the vilification of Haiti as a cesspool of immorality and infection, which through its very proximity became a vulnerable chink in America’s armour, and concerns over air travel and gay tourism as a vector of infection, exacerbated fears over how national borders were policed in this period.<sup>80</sup> This hysteria reached its apotheosis in 1987 when HIV/AIDS was added by law to a list of dangerous, contagious diseases that would exclude people from entering the country, physically restricting the movement of *some* bodies across U.S. borders.

That the movement across borders constitutes a crucial conceptual crossing between the seemingly distinct realms of “Latino” and “HIV/AIDS” has not gone altogether unnoticed. In ‘Sexilio,’ San Francisco based Mexican author Pedro Bustos Aguilar states:

AIDS travels extensively and crosses borders daily, and as another migrant body, enters the fabric of social order as a resistance. The discourses it generates are sophisticated, multiplying, rationalizing; the bodies it ravages expose an undocumented, illegal, unreasonable migrant, irreducible to the bio-chemical or the medical.<sup>81</sup>

This imagery is conceptually helpful, if imprecise. It is important to acknowledge that whilst viruses are marked by a propensity to proliferate, AIDS is a syndrome defined by the effects that various opportunistic infections have on bodies with compromised immunity, therefore it is impossible for AIDS to travel, cross borders, or be transmitted between bodies in any simplistic sense.

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<sup>79</sup> John Protevi, *Political Physics: Deleuze, Derrida, and the Body Politic* (London: The Athlone Press, 2001), 101.

<sup>80</sup> See Phil Tiemeyer, *Plane Queers: Labor, Sexuality, and AIDS in the History of Male Flight Attendants* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2013).

<sup>81</sup> Pedro Bustos Aguilar, ‘Sexilio,’ *Corpus*, ed. Jaime Cortez, vol. 1, no. 1 (Spring 2003), 47.

However, Bustos Aguilar's next observation begins to clarify this problematic conflation of HIV with AIDS; AIDS, more than HIV, is unmasked as a discursive aberration, a construction that nevertheless generates other discursive offshoots. One such thread is the symbol of the migrant body in North America in the closing decades of the twentieth century. For Bustos Aguilar, AIDS (as it materialises in discourse) resists being manoeuvred as some abstract conceptual stand-in for the migrant, migrating, or migratory body, refuses to occupy the position as the subject of some suffocating simile which inevitably works to position AIDS and migration in an asymmetrical dialectic, in an almost-but-not-quite economy of association. Rather, AIDS becomes for Bustos Aguilar a way for the body (and the constitutive body of discourse) to be in constant flux, transition, and exile, to be and, perhaps more significantly, to *become* migratory. Succinctly, AIDS is not *like* migration, AIDS *is* migration. In conclusion, Bustos Aguilar declares: "The text of the history of how the migrant body of AIDS is changing us as it destroys us is yet to be written. [...] it will come from the bodies and trajectories of the millions of disenfranchised migrants whose porous bodies are no less permeable than the borders they continue to cross."<sup>82</sup>

The conflation of HIV/AIDS and migration also features heavily in Sandoval-Sánchez's emotive essay, 'An AIDS Testimonial.' Describing his experiences as a gay Puerto Rican with AIDS he writes:

I had to reinvent myself after both acts of migration. If by leaving Puerto Rico I had to cross geographic, linguistic, social, cultural, and national borders, after AIDS I found myself back to the future crossing sexual, political, existential, pathological, and life-threatening borderlands. I had to resist nostalgia for my homeland, as well as nostalgia for a youthful and energized body. There was no return to my "Isla del Encanto," nor to my healthy body.<sup>83</sup>

Sandoval-Sánchez defines his cultural identity in relation to borders. Puerto Ricans have a unique, rather precarious, relationship with the U.S. Unlike other Central, South American, and Caribbean populations, Puerto Ricans hold U.S. citizenship and are not rigidly controlled by immigration patrol. Rather, Puerto Ricans residing in the United States have unrestricted access to their homeland. After AIDS this became a crisis of public health. The passage between the two nations became synonymous with death as Puerto Ricans descended on their island homeland in droves to die amongst family and friends. A *New*

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<sup>82</sup> Bustos Aguilar, 'Sexilio,' 50.

<sup>83</sup> Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez, 'An AIDS Testimonial: It's a Broken Record/Ese Disco Se Rayó,' *Technofuturos: Critical Interventions in Latina/o Studies*, ed. Nancy Raquel Mirabel Agustin Laó-Montes (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2007), 301.

*York Times* article of 1990 argued that on the island, gay tourists and Nuyoricans became an enduring symbol of HIV transmission.<sup>84</sup> Similarly, the Airbus, a vehicle used to shuttle people between Puerto Rico and mainland America, became construed as an oscillating mausoleum, carrying bodies back to the island for burial.<sup>85</sup> Sandoval-Sánchez cannot separate his experiences as a Puerto Rican migrant, as a gay man, as a person with AIDS; they are painfully spliced together, conjoined in a jarring recitation of exclusion:

Deterritorialization strikes my memory twice with the force of a category-five hurricane: my migration from my native home Puerto Rico in 1973 and my AIDS diagnoses in 1990. I can only see the ruins, debris, and ashes of my embodied memories submerging in a monstrous, cadences tidal wave of airports, hospitals, airline tickets, X-rays, runways, examination tables, take offs, surgeries, landings, recoveries.<sup>86</sup>

[...]

My body did not feel at home after migration. And after AIDS, my body was homeless but never homesick. After both migrations I began to live in the cracks of Otherness. My body became aware of its illegal status under the possibility of a haunting deportation. My skin, my hair, my nose, my lips, my eyes, my ears, my accent, my gestures, my wasted body marked the exiled condition of a second-class citizenship: a Puerto Rican with AIDS.<sup>87</sup>

For Sandoval-Sánchez, AIDS plays out as a negotiation of not only his racial and cultural identity but of *space*. His physical transgression of national borders is mirrored in his psychological transgression of social boundaries. His alienation from his failing body is translated as nostalgia for his departed homeland, a condition long associated with physical malady.<sup>88</sup>

In *Powers of Horror* Kristeva states: “The one by whom the abject exists is thus a *deject* who places (himself), *separates* (himself), situates (himself), and therefore *strays* instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing. [...] Instead of sounding himself as to his ‘being,’ he does so concerning his place: ‘Where am I?’ instead of ‘Who am I?’”<sup>89</sup> The *deject* is nevertheless endowed with agency: “A deviser of territories,

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<sup>84</sup> ‘AIDS Travels New York-Puerto Rico ‘Air Bridge,’” *New York Times*, June 15 1990, B1.

<sup>85</sup> See Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez, ‘Puerto Rican Identity Up in the Air: Air Migration, Its Cultural Representations, and Me “Cruzando el Charco,”’ *Puerto Rican Jam*.

<sup>86</sup> Sandoval-Sánchez, ‘An AIDS Testimonial,’ 300.

<sup>87</sup> Sandoval-Sánchez, ‘An AIDS Testimonial,’ 306.

<sup>88</sup> Svetlana Boym argues that nostalgia transformed from a curable physical disease, primarily affecting soldiers, to an incurable psychological, romanticised condition: “Longing for home exhausted the “vital spirits,” causing nausea, loss of appetite, pathological changes in the lungs, brain inflammation, cardiac arrests, high fever, as well as marasmus and a propensity for suicide.” See Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 4.

<sup>89</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 8: emphasis in original.



languages, works, the *deject* never stops demarcating his universe whose fluid confines – for they are constituted of a non-object, the abject – constantly question his solidity and impel him to start afresh.”<sup>90</sup> Here Kristeva suggests that borders are not merely structures which serve as a limit, an abject frontier beyond which something dangerous or unseemly lurks, ready to attack. Rather abjection places the deject outside of strict and constricting bounded systems, the deject becomes intelligible through “his” positioning, not his being.

This resonates in borderland scholarship. Perhaps the most generative and exciting intervention Latino/a studies has made into the field of borderland scholarship is to rethink the border as a concept, to transform it from *frontier* – a harsh edge, impregnated with expansionist rhetoric – to *frontera* – an ambiguous, fluctuating space promoting interaction. Whilst a border is a dividing line “set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them,” Anzaldúa argues, “a borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition.”<sup>91</sup> Similarly, queer theorist Annamarie Jagose contends that the border “is a legislative line which insists on demarcation and separation. *Yet equally it is an interface*, conjoining the categories it distinguishes.”<sup>92</sup> For Jagose the figure of the border becomes a site of alienation and disfiguration – a harsh slash, gouged into the earth with rather sinister intentions, to separate people and places, to protect the spaces of privilege and mark the places of neglect – *and* a space of intimate contact – a suture binding subjects and objects together in benevolent economies of relationality. By mapping spaces of vulnerability and oppositionality, borders help to create dissident citizens who derive their very subjectivity from rejecting hegemonic, centralised, and normative identities.

In this sense abjection must be understood as more than a mechanism which protects the sanctity of the subject, and the social groups which align with “the subject”; rather, abjection can be utilised as a place of radical departure, taken up as an affective impulse that breaks down simplistic narratives of exclusion and assimilation. As Sandoval-Sánchez eloquently concludes:

the queer Latino abject subject located at the privileged site of boundaries can empower himself given his positionality between exclusion and incorporation. Abject Latino queer bodies in liminal zones of abjection can transgress borders, allowing for the possibility of subversion and emancipation. In this way, abject

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<sup>90</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 8.

<sup>91</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 25.

<sup>92</sup> Annamarie Jagose, *Lesbian Utopics* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), 137: emphasis added.

Latino queer bodies are dangerous because they do challenge and menace the fragile limits of the order of things and social hierarchies.<sup>93</sup>

Abjection functions to reaffirm difference and the fortuitousness of alterity. As the following chapter elucidates, examining the strategies of assimilation in the works of gay, Cuban artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres, queer Latinos with HIV walk a fine line between hyper-visibility and invisibility, between “exclusion and incorporation.” As a highly stigmatised and despised demographic, which nevertheless hold the possibility of remaining undetectable, this group is conspicuous in their liminality, in their ability to “pass” as other, to move across lines of sexuality, gender (when gender is linked with an active/passive dichotomy of sexual relations), race, ethnicity, nationality, and health. This lack of specificity, as it relates to race, is taken up in the next section, through further close reading of the writing of Pedro Bustos Aguilar.

### **“The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite”**

For Kristeva, abjection is present whenever and wherever the solidity of normative and normalising categories is jeopardised. “Abjection,” she assures the reader, “is above all ambiguity,”<sup>94</sup> whilst later she posits that it is “the logic of *confusion* that causes the abject to exist.”<sup>95</sup> At the end of the twentieth century, this ambiguity pervaded the swift emergence of Latino/a (and Hispanic) groups as multiracial, loosely-defined communities, and as semantic designations which had not existed in official channels before the 1970s. As an ethnic signifier, indexing a diverse group which had no overarching heritage, language, culture, or race with which to bind it, Latino/a identity is, to parrot Kristeva, above all ambiguity. If, as Ahmed proposes, abjection disseminates through the sticky relationality of historically situated signs, then affective responses to Latino/as in the U.S., which often manifest as feelings of disgust, anxiety, and fear, may derive from the collapse of separation between races, conceived in the dominant imaginary as distinct. Racial difference and racial ambiguity are excluded so that the healthy, functional subject, the white body-at-home, may, through separation, come into being.

In an essay entitled ‘At the Crossroads of Race’ prominent Chicano critic Tomás Almaguer observes: “our multiraciality is the single most unique feature of the Latino/a

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<sup>93</sup> Sandoval-Sánchez, ‘Politicizing Abjection,’ 548.

<sup>94</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 9.

<sup>95</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 65: emphasis added.

experience in the United States today.”<sup>96</sup> More than any other ethnic group in America Latino/as embody ambiguity, historically, socially, culturally, and discursively. Nowhere is this more palpable than in relation to the vertiginous racialisation(s) of Latino/a subjects; certainly Latino/as have long had an extremely vexed relationship to racial classification in America. The historian Ernesto Chávez claims that following the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848), the agreement codifying the cession of Mexican territory to the United States, Mexicans residing in the newly annexed borderlands were offered U.S. citizenship and upon acquiescence of this legal shift became interpellated as racially white (as only “white” immigrants were eligible for U.S. citizenship at the time). Proximity to Anglo culture ensured the transmission and alteration of racial identity. However, these new citizens were routinely denied privileges and subjected to de facto segregation, cementing their status as “in between” people.<sup>97</sup> In antebellum America this act of incorporation also served to prop up other oppressive hierarchies which had long proliferated in the U.S., namely the segregation of black from white. From this period on, mestizo citizens in the Southwest acquired their racial identities and were awarded their (albeit restricted) legal rights because they were not black; they became defined by a negation of racial specificity.<sup>98</sup> The presence of blackness also transformed narratives of racial mixture; if “mulatto” became a denigrated signifier, perpetually besmirched by the existence of the “one drop rule,” “mestizo” became a privileged cipher because it stood for the *presence* of the European and the *absence* of the African. Just as AIDS signifies as a lack of immunity, Latino/a ethnicity in the Southwest emerged as a dearth of something else.

The intractability of the black/white dyad in the U.S. became a key anxiety fuelling twentieth century Nuyorican cultural production. In *Down These Mean Streets* (1967), Piri Thomas’s foundational exploration of Puerto Rican life in Spanish Harlem, the status of Puerto Ricans as in-between subjects – misrecognised by white and black society alike – is a prevailing theme and a source of anger and abject humiliation for the dark-skinned protagonist: “I hate the paddy who’s trying to keep the black man down. But I’m beginning to hate the black man, too, ’cause I can feel his pain and I don’t know that it oughtta be

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<sup>96</sup> Tomás Almaguer, ‘At the Crossroads of Race: Latino/a Studies and Race Making in the United States,’ *Critical Latin American and Latino Studies*, ed. Juan Poblete (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 206.

<sup>97</sup> Ernesto Chávez, *¡Mi Raza Primero! (My People First): Nationalism, Identity, and Insurgency in the Chicano Movement in Los Angeles, 1966-1978* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 2.

<sup>98</sup> This also permeated south of the border; Carole Boyce Davies states that “mestizo/a” identity was adopted by Latin American communities “in order to distance one from darker-skinned peoples and others who identify as ‘African,’ ‘Afro,’ or ‘Black.’” See Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (Oxford: Routledge, 1994), 16.

mine.”<sup>99</sup> “Ricans are funny people,” muses a white Irish character in Miguel Piñero’s prison-based play *Short Eyes* (1974), “They get a big-brother attitude about the whites in jail. But they also back the niggers to the T.”<sup>100</sup> Racially ambiguous, with split alliances between black and white, Nuyoricans became represented in this period as porous, permeable, and treacherous, out of kilter with “a world ruled by ferociously defended racial and sexual limits.”<sup>101</sup> Marginalised, defined in relation to invisibility and misrecognition – imagined as neither white nor black, bucking any easy assumptions concerning racial polarity and citizenship in the U.S. – Nuyoricans reveal the abstract nature of racial and national classifications.

By the 1980s this slippage across racial categories came to define Nuyoricans as indeterminate, almost unmanageable figures, unclassifiable in the nevertheless racially diverse spaces of the city. This is particularly evident in relation to New York’s sexually polymorphous subcultures. Drawing upon his interviews with Juan Rivera (a.k.a. Juanito Xtravaganza), the Puerto Rican, HIV-positive partner of the renowned pop artist Keith Haring, Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé muses on the intense desire of the late artist for Rivera: he was “not only ‘street’ or urban New York and handsomely photogenic, but of a *certain equivocal Puerto Rican cast and hue* that would make him appear, paradoxically, internationally indigenous or local.”<sup>102</sup> Indeed this was the case; describing Rivera, whom he had first met at the Paradise Garage, a famed New York nightclub patronised by an eclectic mix of gay men, artists, and black, white, and Latino street kids, Haring remarked in his posthumously published journals that he was “forever handsome with a chameleon face that adapts to every place we go, making him look Brazilian, Moroccan [...] or part Japanese.”<sup>103</sup>

The mass migration of Puerto Ricans to New York City in the 1920s, an effect of the Jones-Shafroth Act of 1917 which extended U.S. citizenship to the island, certainly sparked anxiety amongst the city’s existing immigrant classes. Following the “Harlem Riots” of July 1926 a journalist for the *New York Times* observed that “the bad feeling [among white immigrant residents of East Harlem] is said to have been caused by the rapid influx of Latin and West Indian negroes who describe themselves as Porto Rican.”<sup>104</sup> There

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<sup>99</sup> Piri Thomas, *Down These Means Streets* [1967] (New York: Vintage, 1997), 124.

<sup>100</sup> Miguel Piñero, *Short Eyes* [1974] (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 28.

<sup>101</sup> Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé, “‘What a Tangled Web!’ Masculinity, Abjection, and the Foundations of Puerto Rican Literature in the United States,” *Sex and Sexuality in Latin America*, ed. Daniel Balderston and Donna J. Guy (New York and London: New York University Press, 1997), 238.

<sup>102</sup> Cruz-Malavé, *Queer Latino Testimonio*, 4: emphasis added.

<sup>103</sup> Keith Haring, *Keith Haring Journals* [1996] (New York: Penguin, 2010), 282.

<sup>104</sup> Cited in Virginia E. Sánchez Korrol, *From Colonia to Community: The History of Puerto Ricans in New York City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 151.

is a hint here, which grows to a direct accusation in *Down These Mean Streets*, that a “Porto Rican” identity has been adopted by “negro” immigrants as a protective ruse, masking a universally despised African heritage with claims to a reputable European culture. Either way this string of rapidly displaced and inadequate ethnonyms (Latin, West Indian, Negro, Porto Rican) reveals that the *Times* lacked an appropriate vocabulary with which to speak of this emerging emigrant group. Here the unmanageability of Latino ethnicity precedes an eventual misrecognition; the abjection of this specific Latino/a group was rooted in a certain semantic frustration, a certain semantic failure.

Like the “Harlem Riots” the “Los Angeles Riots” of April and May 1992 played out in the media as a melodrama of warring races, sparked by the video footage which had emerged of African-American Rodney King being beaten by white LAPD officers. However, unlike the “Watts Rebellion” of August 1965, commentators have argued that these riots were not wholly racially motivated: “Race was the visible catalyst, not the underlying cause.”<sup>105</sup> Race alone became ousted as the root cause because this time it was Latino/as, and in particular, Latino/a immigrants, who emerged as the guilty demographic. As the media soon discovered, attempting to profile the Latino/as captured on screen looting and rampaging on the L.A. streets from within a bifurcated racial frame was implausible; now other factors had to be taken into consideration. Describing the media obscuring of race during the riots, Victor Valle and Rodolfo D. Torres draw a very intriguing comparison: “like the new virus which the body’s immune system has not yet learned to recognize, the media lacked a semantic category with which to identify and conceptualize Latino ambiguity.”<sup>106</sup> Clearly the slipperiness of the term “Latino” resonated within contemporaneous narratives of AIDS as ambiguous, as a troublesome signifier, invested in a shifting landscape of displacements in which meaning is never fixed, never tenable, infinitely absent. Once again, Latino/as are represented as “just like AIDS”; both are seen as existing outside of the (national) body, entering stealthily to disrupt the coherency of the host, the tacitly white body-at-home. There is a sense that the invention of these new semantic categories, the proffering of these labels as official markers of identity, entails an attempt to manage the unmanageable, to corral the abject.

Speaking to this history of racial ambiguity, “brown” as a politicised marker of Latino/a identity has gained considerable discursive currency since the new millennium (especially amongst queer-of-colour theorists), with critics such as José Esteban Muñoz,

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<sup>105</sup> Cornel West, *Race Matters* [1993] (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 1.

<sup>106</sup> Victor Valle and Rodolfo D. Torres, ‘The Idea of *Mestizaje* and the “Race” Problematic: Racialized Media Discourse in a Post-Fordist Landscape,’ *Culture and Difference*, 141.

Richard Rodriguez, Frederick Luis Aldama, and Hiram Perez grappling with this term. Like the appropriation of “queer” by lesbian and gay subjects, the resurgent tendency to adopt a “brown” positionality, to luxuriate in a new “brown(ed)” aesthetic, involves a conscious redetermination of existing power structures, where the abject cipher is adopted to mark a break with hegemonic, stabilising norms, to proudly claim sites of agitating, often murky and anxiety-provoking, oppositionality. By acknowledging that brown is a provisional identity – “a waiting station of sorts” between racial categories<sup>107</sup> – Hiram Perez advocates for the tactical utilisation of brown to demystify the ways bodies are positioned outside of stultifying racial binaries. He asks:

What color is brown? In regard to race classification, brown is no more a natural color than black or white or yellow or red; brown is a verb. “Brown” designates a kind of constitutive ambiguity within U.S. racial formations – an identity that both complicates and preserves the binary opposition white/other. I use the category here to mark a position of essential itinerancy relative to naturalized, positivist classes such as white, black, Asian [...] As a repository for the disowned, projected desires of a cosmopolitan subject, it is alternatively (or simultaneously) primitive, exotic, savage, pansexual, and abject [...] In an age of weak multiculturalism, it is what it needs to be to maintain existing racial hierarchies, a race discourse morally divested from politics and social redistribution. That ambiguity designated here as “brown” is opportunistically and systematically deployed at times of crisis – as instanced by the intensified race profiling authorized by 9/11.<sup>108</sup>

In the preface to *Brown: The Last Discovery of America* (2002), the third offering of an autobiographical trilogy that includes *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez* (1982) and *Days of Obligation: An Argument with my Mexican Father* (1992), Richard Rodriguez, arguably the most prominent (yet most heavily criticised) gay Latino author and critic, outlines his investment in brown:

Brown as impurity.

I write of a color that is not a singular color, not a strict recipe, not an expected result, but a color produced by careless desire, even by accident; by two or several. I write of blood that is blended. I write of brown as complete freedom of substance and narration. I extol impurity.

Brown bleeds through the straight line, unstaunchable – the line separating black from white, for example. Brown confuses. Brown forms at the border of contradiction (the ability of language to express two or several things at once, the ability of bodies to experience two or several things at once).<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Hiram Perez, ‘You Can Have My Brown Body and Eat It, Too!’ *Social Text* 23, 84/85: 3-4 (Fall/Winter, 2005), 175.

<sup>108</sup> Perez, ‘You Can Have My Brown Body and Eat It, Too!’ 175-176.

<sup>109</sup> Richard Rodriguez, *Brown: The Last Discovery of America* (New York: Penguin, 2002), xi.

Brown, Rodriguez claims, encapsulates impurity precisely because it involves the mixture of a spectrum of colours; to get brown you have to “create a real fine mess, like shit.”<sup>110</sup> But whilst this mixture, this racial and cultural *mestizaje*, is a mark of pride in Latin America, the “United States has never spoken of such matters,”<sup>111</sup> because brown does not exist in the bifurcating of race in America. Rather brown is an affective economy that stands as a signifier of something else: the breakdown in racial taxonomies concocted by Federal channels; the historical shattering of state-sanctioned taboos, such as those prohibiting interracial sexual union; the immoderate desire of white men (not wholly unlike the assumptions surrounding the arrival HIV/AIDS).<sup>112</sup> Although Rodriguez’s choice of language is highly suspect – to describe the sexual exploitation that accompanied European conquest as “careless,” a mere “accident,” seems needlessly inflammatory – he goes on to clarify this: “Brown, the color of consort; brown, the color of illicit passion [...] brown, the stench of rape and of shame, sin, slippage, birth.”<sup>113</sup> For the purposes of this project, “brown” holds a particularly strong lure. Not only does it problematically inhabit the conceptual borderlands of racial classification, eschewing clarity in favour of confusion (which in turn indexes the deterioration of other structures such as sexual comportment), it emerges as a marker which self-reflexively encapsulates, and appropriates, the historical and metaphorical connections between Latino/as and contamination in North America. Like HIV/AIDS, brown speaks to a beleaguered and often hidden history of erotic desire and “illicit passion.” Like HIV/AIDS, brown also emerges through *networks* of intimacy, spreading far beyond the fecundity of “two” bodies to index the melded desire of “several” bodies.

Thus can HIV-positive people, discursively crafted in relation to notions of impurity, be understood as brown? Certainly, as this entire project lays claim to, both Latino identity and HIV/AIDS have been constructed by narratives of fluid exchange and blood-mixing via often stigmatised forms of erotic intimacy. Take what has become arguably the most recognisable, visual icon from the first two decades of the epidemic: the Kaposi Sarcoma (KS) lesion. This rare form of cancer, which adversely affected gay men,

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<sup>110</sup> Richard Rodriguez, ‘Brown: An Erotic History of the Americas,’ Humanities Lecture Series, University of California Santa Barbara, 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2002, Lecture.

<sup>111</sup> Richard Rodriguez, ‘Brown: The Erotic History of America: An Interview with Richard Rodriguez,’ *Metropole* 16: 68-80, 70.

<sup>112</sup> Indeed at the beginning of *Days of Obligation* Rodriguez outlines his interpretation of *mestizo*: “Mestizo in Mexican Spanish means mixed, confused. Clotted with Indian, thinned by Spanish spume.” Rodriguez’s description is highly suggestive, tacitly linking *mestizo* heritage with the exploited Indian mother (“clot” signifying blood and stasis) by the conquering European father (“spume” connoting a spurting forth, a burst of aggressive agency), a process of whitening encapsulated in the thinning of Indian blood. See Rodriguez, *Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father* (New York: Penguin, 1992), 2.

<sup>113</sup> Rodriguez, *Brown*, 133.

stands as a visual consequence of blood's hazardous propensity to reach beyond its proscribed borders, facilitated by economies of non-normative desire.<sup>114</sup> KS is a cancer of the blood vessel lining that corrodes the stability of this delicate membrane, allowing the blood to seep into the surrounding tissue producing a deep purple-brown stain on the surface of the skin. If, as Rodriguez insists, brown is the *unstaunchable* substance which *bleeds through the straight lines* imposed by American society, then KS is infallibly brown; if the containment of "clean" blood within healthy, discreet bodies has become a prevailing concern, a way to inhibit the spread of disease, then the rupturing of blood vessels (those "straight lines" which keep blood securely in place) comes to index a state of dangerous transgression in those bodies which eschew straightness. Just as taxonomies of racial purity have imagined blood as dangerously fluid, reaching beyond the sanctuary of the closed, immaculate body, and just as the brown body is proffered as fleshy evidence of blood-mixing, KS was imaged as corporeal proof of the dangers which accrue at the sites of bleeding, at the sites where "immoral" behaviour has rendered the body conspicuously vulnerable. The material residue left by this bodily transgression (the dark splotches that brand the person living with AIDS as both "toxic" and "dissident") becomes a transitory site, a new borderland, which testifies to the very presence of contamination and the collapse of boundaries within the body, and to the accompanying narratives of presumed sexual perversity, recklessness, and moral bankruptcy. The KS lesions not only physically *mark* the (tacitly white) homosexual subject as dark, *as brown*, they also stand as visual traces of AIDS, they *stand in* for occluded narratives of social transgression. The construction of normative subjects relies upon the visible evidence of transgression in all its multiplicity.

That is not to say that my appropriation of a brown aesthetic (indebted to Rodriguez) is without problems. Indeed there is a risk that "brown" may become the new, all-encompassing umbrella term which promises shelter for the disenfranchised masses whilst performing a slide into invisibility, a pleasing catchall that promotes intellectual malaise by sidestepping careful, detailed, and specific analysis of race. Rodriguez's claim in a 2002 interview with Suzy Hansen that "we are, all of us, in our various colors, our various hues, melting into each other and creating a brown nation"<sup>115</sup> certainly suggests a

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<sup>114</sup> Some accounts have noted that the type of opportunistic infections contracted seems to be determined by the route of HIV transmission. For example, KS was highly prevalent amongst those who had acquired HIV via sexual intercourse whereas intravenous drug users were more likely to develop pneumonia. KS had previously been associated with middle-aged men of Mediterranean extraction, therefore from its first appearance in the gay populace it was seen as other and as alien.

<sup>115</sup> Cited in Suzy Hansen, 'The Browning of America,' *Salon*, 27<sup>th</sup> April 2002. [http://www.salon.com/2002/04/27/rodriguez\\_6/](http://www.salon.com/2002/04/27/rodriguez_6/). Accessed 8<sup>th</sup> October 2013.



dilution of the potential for “brown” to signify a radically oppositional stance (brown is now an identity up for grabs by all Americans) whilst simultaneously negating the importance of maintaining racial specificity and embodied politics. Any hint that “brown” may be historically situated, may encompass the politics of either the Brown Berets or the Puerto Rican Young Lords – two Civil Rights groups that adopted brown as the colour of resistance – has been skilfully obscured in Rodriguez’s account. Rather, unlikely modern political figures – Richard Nixon, “the father of Hispanicity,”<sup>116</sup> and George W. Bush, “America’s first Hispanic president”<sup>117</sup> – are charged with taking up the mantle of brown. As Ilan Stavans observes, for Rodriguez “America is about to become América – everyone in it a Hispanic, if not physically, at least metaphorically.”<sup>118</sup>

Rodriguez’s use of brown differs radically from that of José Esteban Muñoz. Muñoz insists that brown is primarily an affective response rather than an identitarian turn: “feeling Brown is feeling together in difference. Feeling Brown is an ‘apartness together’ through sharing the status of being a problem.”<sup>119</sup> In this sense, imagining a person with HIV as brown is appropriate, when brown speaks to a complex history of abjection in America, to the exclusion, visibility, and misrecognition of those subjects positioned as chaotic and problematic. For Muñoz, the performance of brown in the U.S. constantly walks a fine line between excess and invisibility, where the staging of the racialised body teeters on the edges of the abject, perpetually threatening to slide into its murky depths.<sup>120</sup> When whiteness is the (albeit overtly sterile) norm, Muñoz suggests, a brown(ed) performance of affect, or indeed the performance of brown affect, often appears contrived, needlessly extravagant, spicy, sexy, and exotic. In *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999) Muñoz acknowledges that lesbians and gay men of colour often reproduce dominant stereotypes, “rendered in all their abjection,”<sup>121</sup> that seemingly play into the marginalisation of non-white cultures. However, he insists, these cultural producers often act to reappropriate these jarring stagings of affect, imbuing their performances with disidentificatory difference – performing identity without assimilating

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<sup>116</sup> Rodriguez, *Brown*, xii.

<sup>117</sup> Rodriguez, *Brown*, 161.

<sup>118</sup> Ilan Stavans, *A Critic’s Journey* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2010), 35.

<sup>119</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, “‘Chico, what does it feel like to be a problem?’ The Transmission of Brownness,” *The Companion to Latina/o Studies*, ed. Juan Flores and Renato Rosaldo (Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2007), 444.

<sup>120</sup> Elizabeth Grosz describes the abject as “a hole into which the subject may fall when its identity is put into question.” See Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (St Leonards, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 1989), 72.

<sup>121</sup> Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 3.

with or actively rejecting dominant ideologies – “which helped toxic images expand and become much more than quaint racisms.”<sup>122</sup>

Extending this argument in an article entitled ‘Feeling Brown,’ which situates Latino/a ethnicity as a “structure of feeling,” to appropriate Raymond Williams’s term, set against the cultural logic of white affect, Muñoz declares:

The affect of Latinos/as is often off. One can even argue that it is off-white. The “failure” of Latino affect, in relation to the hegemonic protocols of North American affective comportment, revolves around an understanding of the Latina or the Latino as affective excess [...] It is not so much that the Latina/o affect performance is so excessive, but that the affective performance of normative whiteness is minimalist to the point of emotional impoverishment. Whiteness claims affective normativity and neutrality, but for that fantasy to remain in place one must only view it from the vantage point of US cultural and political hegemony. Once we look at whiteness from a racialised perspective, like that of Latinos, it begins to appear to be flat and impoverished. At this moment in history it seems especially important to position whiteness as lack.”<sup>123</sup>

I contend that it is problematic, and seemingly undesirable, to unreservedly characterise whiteness as lack; lack implies the loss or absence of something vital, of something that holds some intrinsic value such as the inarguable power and unearned privilege accruing to white citizen-subjects. However, the conceptualisation of whiteness as lack (indeed as a lack of corporeal protection) becomes significant when exploring Latino responses to the early AIDS epidemic, an epidemic which emerged as a play of dangerous and erroneous myths, the most potent of which was the assurance that HIV/AIDS was indelibly a “gay plague” and a “white man’s disease,” a threat permeating from and circulating amongst specific demographics. As ACT UPer Moisés Agosto contends, to begin with “in Puerto Rico [HIV/AIDS] was a gringo thing [...] it was something going on with Americans. And usually I had this personal policy that I would not have sex with Americans.”<sup>124</sup> An examination of the effects of seroconversion on the sensibilities of Latino cultural producers must therefore speak to an already perplexing history of racial classification which positions Latino/as in a precarious dialectic with whiteness, and with whiteness-as-American. To illuminate this further, I wish to return to Pedro Bustos Aguilar, whose writing not only represents the brown body as abject, as set apart from Anglo America, but

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<sup>122</sup> Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, x.

<sup>123</sup> Muñoz, ‘Feeling Brown,’ 206- 207.

<sup>124</sup> Moisés Agosto interview with Sarah Schulman, ACT UP Oral History Project, Interview Number: 003, December 14, 2002, Tape I, 2. <http://actuporalhistory.org/interviews/images/agosto.pdf>. Accessed December 9th 2013.

actually frames Latino racial ambiguity as an *effect* of HIV transmission via interracial gay sex.

In a series of uncomfortable questions Sandoval-Sánchez sets out his reasons for adopting abjection as a framing device for a discussion of gay Latinos with AIDS:

What does it mean to have the monster under your skin? How can you love your abject body when it betrays you? How do you feel in a society that expels the sick, the Latino, the queer, the migrant, the undocumented, the alien, the Other, should I also say, the living dead, the corpse?<sup>125</sup>

These questions seem to meet with an answer in Bustos Aguilar's semi-autobiographical, bilingual short story 'Nueva Flor de Canela,' published in Jaime Cortez's 1999 edited anthology *Virgins, Guerrillas & Locas: Gay Latinos Writing about Love*. From the beginning, Bustos Aguilar positions his gay, Latino, HIV-positive first person narrator (his oblique reflection) in a symbiotic relationship with his acquired virus:

I live with the virus, I have this thing inside me, there are two of us now, until the moment I stopped fighting it out of my life, stopped negating it, and I could finally accept living with it, next to it, within it, protecting it as I have to now because it has become the strongest and the weakest part of me, the place in my life and my body where all the best and the worst are resolved, where the old and the new me meet and are one and as I day by day try to make it the place of harmony, of acceptance, of courage, because I and my virus are imperfection and in the interstices of my flaws and those of these creatures inside lie my life, our coexistence, our best chances to be and be happy, 'cause positive is full of crevices [...] Is it the virus that took it all away from me when it first entered my body and took over my life? Or was it me, rather, who decided to push it all away, to punish the intruder who was, in the end, now I see, part of me, and only me? It was me, it was it, it was both of us looking for a way to be together, queer lovers afraid of taking up a relationship that is bigger than each one anticipated, but the relationship is unavoidable, so here we are together getting through, no longer strange bedfellows, intimate like the inner craving and desire that initially pushed a chemical paradox into the flux of my very core and that turned my outer self into a compromised immune system and my inner self into a gladiator preparing for the next battle with ever-greater weapons.<sup>126</sup>

The interaction between the narrator and the virus in his bloodstream performs a dissembling of and from normative intimacies by illuminating the intensities of feelings which occur between the "infected host" and the "parasitic virus" (two positionalities that serve to maintain reductive notions of the body as a bounded, self-reliant structure); after

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<sup>125</sup> Sandoval-Sánchez, 'Politicizing Abjection,' 544.

<sup>126</sup> Pedro Bustos Aguilar, 'Nueva Flor de Canela,' *Virgins, Guerrillas & Locas: Gay Latinos Writing about Love*, ed. Jaime Cortez (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1999), 189-190.

all, the narrative has been branded as a “love story” and Bustos Aguilar hailed as a gay Latino writing about love. The narrator and the virus are no longer “strange bedfellows” but an oblique translation, a non-heteronormative flipside; beginning as unlikely allies, forged beneath the sheets, they have transformed into “queer lovers.” Here, intimacy is not imagined as an affective flux *between* two ostensibly separate bodies or surfaces; rather intimacy names processes of transmission and the accommodation of the other *within* the self. Assimilating via reverse transcription, viruses intrude “invisibly on the level of DNA, reminding us as their progeny emerge within our own cells that our bodies are not our own [...] Viruses illuminate the silent interior of the body, a flesh that is close, vital, and familiarly strange as only our mothers’ have been to us.”<sup>127</sup> But for Bustos Aguilar the interaction of host and virus does not mimic some primordial maternal dependence, his straining desire is not understood as a cleaving for the body of the mother; rather, he sees his desire for the virus as an extension of his queer desire (for white men).

If indeed viruses signify as “flesh that is close,” then proximity plays a vital role in understanding all affective relations between pathogens and hosts, including the abject. This is not surprising. After all, “contact” signifies (and implies) contagion, a conflation rendered deathly significant after the start of the AIDS crisis; as Ed Cohen and Julie Livingston state, AIDS “troubles our beliefs about separation and hierarchy. It reveals our ability to touch one another, even across tremendous distances and socioeconomic differences. Contagion, after all, literally means ‘together touching.’”<sup>128</sup> Certainly in the opening decade of the epidemic the instigation of public health policies such as contact tracing and the frenzy elicited by attempts to follow the fabled trail of breadcrumbs to find Patient Zero, the man charged with bringing AIDS to America, marked a desire to make visible previously occluded networks of infection, which in turn concealed webs of sexual intimacy.<sup>129</sup> Furthermore, “contact” also marks race relations in the Americas for, as Almaguer argues, “one can chart a continually unfolding process of racialization as American Indians, Africans, and later Mexicans, Chinese, Japanese, and so on have successively come into prolonged *contact* with whites and *consequently* been racially classified,”<sup>130</sup> a process which, he is keen to state, is nevertheless never wholly unilateral.

Anxieties over deracination (fostered by contact with and proximity to whiteness) have certainly reverberated in gay Latino cultural production. Francisco X. Alarcón, a Los

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<sup>127</sup> Dennis Foster, ‘Fatal West: W.S. Burroughs’s Perverse Destiny,’ *Perversion and the Social Relation*, ed. Molly Anne Routhenberg, Dennis A. Foster, and Slavoj Žižek (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 24.

<sup>128</sup> Ed Cohen and Julie Livingston, ‘AIDS,’ *Social Text* 100, vol. 27, no.3, Fall 2009, 39-42, 40.

<sup>129</sup> See Shilts, *And the Band Played On*.

<sup>130</sup> Almaguer, ‘At the Crossroads of Race,’ 207: emphasis added.

Angeles based gay advocate, barrio activist, and poet represents his race as elastic, constantly transforming as he moves beyond the boundaries of the barrio: “I used to be much darker,” he declares, “maybe I’m too far up north [...] up here ‘dark’ is only for the ashes.”<sup>131</sup> Similarly, the autobiographical fiction of gay Cuban-American doctor turned San Francisco based author Rafael Campo charts his impulses to mask his origins: “As a child of immigrants, I imagined that my white coat might make up for, possibly even purify, my nonwhite skin; learning the medical jargon might be the ultimate refutation of any questions about what my first language had been.”<sup>132</sup> In Chapter Three I examine the writing of Gil Cuadros, whose work is contoured by his complex desire for white men. In cultures that have historically been precariously situated at the cusp of whiteness, intimate mixing with white bodies (via processes of penetration, assimilation, and transculturation) threatens to destabilise racial identity, driving the performance of brownness to the margins of available economies of representation, manoeuvred into assemblages of extreme racial stereotypes and insipid replications of white culture. Whiteness persists as a racial, ethnic, and cultural spectre haunting conceptualisations of Latino/a ambiguity and difference in the U.S.

For Bustos Aguilar, close proximity to whiteness references an additional danger. Now transculturation, “a phenomenon of the contact zone” Pratt tells us, that denotes “how subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials *transmitted* to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture,”<sup>133</sup> becomes symptomatic of HIV infection. The transmission of a virus indexes the transmission of race. Therefore, I contend that transculturation can (and should) be refracted through the lens of HIV/AIDS discourse, for like HIV/AIDS, transculturation reveals the capacity for ostensibly separate(d) bodies, nations, and cultures to affect each other, to bring about extreme change through anxiety-provoking intimacy. Bustos Aguilar performs transculturation through his writing, as he “selects” new perspectives and “invents” alternative forms of intimacy to reconcile his own relatedness to a viral agent that is alien (coming from somewhere else) and alienable (able to be transferred to others) yet simultaneously inalienable (impossible to disown), a virus he believes has been transmitted to him by the dominant (read white, U.S.) culture. However, for Bustos Aguilar, transculturation, a term first coined by Cuban anthropologist

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<sup>131</sup> Francisco X. Alarcón, ‘I Used to Be Much Darker,’ *From the Other Side of Night/Del Otro Lado De La Noche: New and Selected Poems* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2002), 10-11.

<sup>132</sup> Rafael Campo, *The Desire to Heal: A Doctor’s Education in Empathy, Identity, and Poetry* (New York: Norton, 1997), 18.

<sup>133</sup> Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 7: emphasis added.

Fernando Ortiz in the 1940s,<sup>134</sup> does not merely position the racialised body in a subaltern position within Anglo culture (although I am not keen to tacitly align the transmitted-to vessel with unexplored notions of subordination) but rather hints at a more symbiotic relationship, where the “oppressed” culture simultaneously assimilates and transforms the “dominant” culture. “While subjugated or marginal groups cannot readily control what emanates from the dominant culture,” Pratt asserts, “they do determine to varying extents what they absorb into their own, and what they use it for.”<sup>135</sup> Take the following excerpt from ‘Nueva Flor de Canela’:

when I have turned pale, when I have lost and acquired an accent, when I have embraced a language and relegated another one, and up on the surface of my skin the brown of my body embraces me, it alone, amid the whiteness, the pale colors of my sexile, of my desire, my acquired color-deficiency syndrome, my love for the white boy [...] even when this white world that violently adopted me by infusing in me a deadly virus rejects me at its borders because I am not pale enough still, because the mother tongue still insinuates herself when I want it, and when I don’t, in the rhythms of the language in which I am loving and learning, growing and dying, with which I am struggling and winning, fighting and losing, because that pale desire is greater than me, because those barriers of whiteness are what I was born to measure up against, to lose against but at the same time to conquer.<sup>136</sup>

The transmission of HIV from the outside to the inside, passing from Anglo American culture into the inner confines of the narrator’s brown body, enacts a version of transculturation in which the specificity of his ethnic positionality, the autonomy of his brown body, and his access to white space becomes compromised (and extended) by the material presence of the (white) virus in his blood. Despite the affection he conjures for the virus in his body, the narrator begins to discern that his virus actually originates from the very culture that works tirelessly to negate him; he relates to it as a cultural signifier reflecting a part of his experience as an immigrant in America, a land which he seems to have no legitimate claim to. Like the torrent of opportunistic infections that assault the compromised immune system, he is forced to defend (often ineffectively) his body from a multi-fronted attack by mainstream culture, an attack against his accent, his language, his coloured skin, and his same-sex desire. The presumption that the pathogen is a culturally neutral entity, emancipated from the dictates of sexual and racial politics in America, is unequivocally exploded here. Rather the virus is furnished with sexuality and race; it is queer and it is white. The narrator internally encodes the dominant representations of

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<sup>134</sup> See Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* [1940] (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

<sup>135</sup> Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 7.

<sup>136</sup> Bustos Aguilar, ‘Nueva Flor de Canela,’ 193.

HIV/AIDS as a “gay plague” – he and the virus are, after all, “queer lovers” – and as a disease primarily affecting, and inflicted by, the ubiquitous “white boy.”

Indeed the presence of HIV in the narrator’s bloodstream (a form of contact zone, harbouring the other) brings him into intimate proximity with white culture, affecting his very ability to conceive of himself as brown. Bustos Aguilar confronts, and potentially agitates, his reader by dubbing the narrator’s condition his “color-deficiency syndrome,” implying that having HIV inside his brown body does not merely deplete the efficacy of his immune system but actually works to corrode his racial identity, to sap his body of the colour that has previously indexed his racial and cultural position as a Latino in the U.S. That he has “acquired” this deficiency again suggests the toxic influence of an external(ised) culture. Muñoz’s suturing of whiteness with lack echoes in Bustos Aguilar’s prose, as here whiteness is also aligned with deficiency: immune deficiency. The presence of whiteness inside the brown body, which has entered sneakily inside a viral agent and performed a violent act of territorialisation, enacts a vitiation of corporeal protection; just as the virus holds the promise of absence (a lack of immunity) so the intervention of whiteness (and the cultural norms it indexes) holds a potential impoverishment of Latino affect. In Chapter Four I extend a reading of the immune system as a racially coded, cultural object; this resonates in Bustos Aguilar’s narrative, for when whiteness enters the narrator’s internal space, triggering a decline of immunological vigour, it in turn performs a scrambling of racial identification.

Affection, infection, and abjection blend in this narrative. The U.S. is analogised as a space of contagion that fosters the unrestricted transference of a disease that “adopts” infantilised outsiders by “infusing in [them] a deadly virus” only to legally and emotionally eject these afflicted children from the protection of the paternal nation-state because they are, in the end, “not pale enough still.” Although Bustos Aguilar colludes in the notion that infection produces bonds of affinity between himself and the virus, and bonds of family between himself and his white lovers (certainly the word “adopt” implies a new familial network) this relatedness acts to shore up other malignant disparities; he is violently taken (“adopt” also suggests a one-directional transference of agency without mutual consent, whilst “infuse” hints at a process of indoctrination, the installation of a new ideological frame through viral assimilation), his body colonised then rejected, his position as a rights-bearing U.S. citizen circumvented on account of his brown skin and dubious health, the abject substances of his very otherness.

This literary grappling with the intimacies and intensities of feeling that accompany the narrator’s interactions with the (racialised) viral agent residing in his body is both

complex and contradictory. Published just outside of this project's time period, a few years after the success of protease inhibitors was officially announced, Bustos Aguilar confronts the altered reality that renewed health presages. He has been changed, he notes,

because I have a now, a present, and a future that I am sketching on the old rags of yesterday with my new blood, blood with antibodies and protease inhibitors, blood of the pain I went through to accept this different chemical landscape inside me that, now I know, would be, is becoming, a new me all the time, in this land that is not mine, in this language that is not mine, in this time that is not mine but that I have reclaimed for myself from a place of no hope that we haven't been able to properly name, the time when we live and die with aids.<sup>137</sup>

Hailing combination therapy as a miraculous drug regime, one which has delivered the narrator from "a place of no hope," he must nevertheless adapt to a further disruption of his identity: the disruption engendered by the infusion of protease inhibitors in his bloodstream. With this new "chemical landscape" he is furnished with "new blood," a now vital substance that will allow him to claim (or rather reclaim, suggesting that he has had some prior claim) a disenfranchised homeland, language, and future, those valuable commodities unavailable to him in the past, in the age when "we" (gay Latinos?) live and die with AIDS.

Abjection is that which disturbs identity, system, order. Abjection is that which does not respect borders, positions, rules. Abjection names the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. For bodies branded as perpetually other, conspicuously crafted in relation to nevertheless permeable and indeterminate categories of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class, bodies negotiating the pitfalls of HIV/AIDS and migration, abjection is poignant and political, rooted in lived experiences. As Sandoval-Sánchez claims, queer Latino bodies with HIV/AIDS "engender and trouble the cohesion of the social order by destabilizing the borders between normal and deviant, insider and outsider, sameness and difference, health and illness, life and death."<sup>138</sup> Building upon his unique theory of abjection as a concept addressing the violent exclusion of otherness in America, I contend that gay Latinos confronting HIV/AIDS generate feelings of disgust precisely because through their vexed relationship to space and race they threaten to corrode facile notions of identity, both personal and national.

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<sup>137</sup> Bustos Aguilar, 'Nueva Flor de Canela,' 192.

<sup>138</sup> Sandoval-Sánchez, 'Politicizing Abjection,' 548.



I have chosen to analyse the exclusion and stigmatisation of queer Latinos with HIV/AIDS through a discussion of borders and race. Borders and borderland scholarship continue to preoccupy Latino/a scholarship precisely because imposed boundaries and the transgression of these boundaries remains a central concern haunting the construction of Latino/a identities in the U.S. Similarly, after the start of the AIDS epidemic the permeability of the nation-state and the patterns of bodily movements forged by twentieth century globalisation and migration ensured that the epidemic would escalate exponentially. But few critics have attempted to map the experiences of bodies and identities formed in relation to both of these areas of discourse. An analysis of the writings of Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez and Pedro Bustos Aguilar opens up this arena, exploring the ways that HIV/AIDS not only becomes aligned with movement and transgression in this period, but also the ways that it becomes a form of movement, migration, and de- and re-territorialisation.

It is my contention that the ambiguous racialisation of Latino/a groups also resonated with the semantic frustration of the contemporaneous AIDS epidemic. Because Latino/as often signified from outside of official racial categories they became interpellated as a population not bound by simplistic identity politics. From the failings of mainstream media to capture the ambiguity of this growing demographic, to the appropriation of a brown aesthetic by Latino/a critics to counter the bifurcation of race in the United States, I argue that the construction of Latino/a identity – their maligned and celebrated status as transgressive, “in-between” people – echoed narratives of confusion and ambiguity that accompanied the arrival of a new and alarming viral agent.

Over the next two chapters I will extend this analysis of space and race. Focusing upon the art installations of the late New York based Cuban-American artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres I explore the concept of assimilation as simultaneously an artistic strategy of mass (re)production and dissemination, a feature of nationalist rhetoric, and a product of viral transmission. In Chapter Three I suggest that HIV/AIDS was utilised in the work of gay Mexican-American Gil Cuadros, a rising yet nevertheless undervalued talent of Los Angeles’ literary scene, to negotiate modes of racial becoming and dissolution via the potency of interracial queer desire. Deploying miscegenation and *mestizaje* as tropes of racial (dis)identity in this period, this chapter questions how Cuadros, as a gay Latino man, interacted with a disease perpetually seen to originate in white, gay culture.

## Chapter Two

### Acquiring Culture

#### Felix Gonzalez-Torres and the Art of Assimilation

On December 7<sup>th</sup> 1990, Cuban writer Reinaldo Arenas committed suicide in New York. An outspoken critic of President Fidel Castro and an open homosexual who had previously been incarcerated for political dissent, Arenas arrived in the U.S. in 1980 as part of the Mariel boatlift. Diagnosed with AIDS in 1987, by 1990, too frail to write, Arenas decided to take his own life. But several months before his suicide he had circulated a note to be published after his death:

There is only one person I hold accountable [for my death]: Fidel Castro. The sufferings of exile, the pain of being banished from my country, the loneliness, and the diseases contracted in exile would probably never have happened if I had been able to enjoy freedom in my country.

I want to encourage the Cuban people out of the country as well as on the Island to continue fighting for freedom. I do not want to convey to you a message of defeat but of continued struggle and of hope.

Cuba will be free. I already am.<sup>1</sup>

For Arenas HIV/AIDS was mired in the oppressions of Cuban communism. Although he had always acknowledged that his seroconversion had occurred within the United States, and certainly he would die in abject poverty, unable to access adequate healthcare, he persistently encoded AIDS as a disease of exile and a product of his alienation from his homeland; Arenas conceptualised AIDS, as Ricardo L. Ortiz observes, “as an unnaturally systematic, all-too-humanly perfect death machine whose only plausible source of origin was for him the closet space of state secrecy, of public conspiracy, of obscene activity”<sup>2</sup> perpetrated and perpetuated by the post-revolutionary Cuban state, and sustained by the U.S. government.

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<sup>1</sup> Reinaldo Arenas, *Before Night Falls* [1992], trans. Dolores M. Koch (New York: Penguin, 1993), 317. *Before Night Falls* was made into a highly acclaimed motion picture in 2000. The film was directed by Julian Schnabel and starred Javier Bardem as Arenas.

<sup>2</sup> Ricardo L. Ortiz, *Cultural Erotics in Cuban America* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 53-54.

Attitudes towards homosexuality within Cuba have been extremely complicated and vertiginous, oscillating between regimens of expulsion and regimes of containment. The creation of Military Units to Aid Production (UMAPs) in the mid-1960s sought to limit the movement of dissident bodies. Although UMAPs contained a variety of demographics deemed antisocial, homosexuals were seen as the most insidious and counter-revolutionary, for as Emilio Bejel notes “homosexuals, [perceived as] being weak and therefore different from the base of macho Cuban culture, [were seen as] perfect targets for recruitment by the enemy (American capitalism mainly).”<sup>3</sup> Bowing to pressure the UMAPs were closed in the late 1960s. In antithesis, the Mariel Boatlift, a mass exodus from Cuba to Florida that actively encouraged the emigration of “enemies” of the state including those considered to be sexual deviants, attempted to eradicate homosexuality within Cuba through the transference of certain bodies to the U.S. Although U.S. President Jimmy Carter initially welcomed the arrivals this changed when he learned that many of the Marielitos were the previous detainees of jails and mental health asylums, sexual dissidents and dark-skinned Cubans chief amongst them. This relocation conjured narratives of disruptive bodies expelled from the island and given licence to infiltrate the U.S., leading to the further stigmatisation of queer bodies of colour on both sides of the Florida strait.

Similarly, Cuba’s early response to HIV/AIDS was shockingly bifurcated, hailed as one of the most discriminatory yet effective emergency health policies ever implemented. By 1983 all imported blood stocks had been destroyed. In 1985 mandatory mass HIV screening was implemented and by 1991 almost the entire population of the island had been tested. In stark contrast to the government of the United States, the Cuban administration acted quickly and decisively to curb the spread of AIDS. Nevertheless, Cuba’s AIDS policy was controversial. In 1986 the government sanctioned the compulsory quarantining of all HIV-positive people in state run sanatoriums. Only people who acquired HIV/AIDS in a manner deemed socially acceptable (without prior knowledge of the risks, for example) were allowed to enter the sanatoriums; the rest were sent to jail. Although detainees ostensibly received free healthcare, wages, and additional food rations the sanatoriums were an affront to human rights and deferred to the conventions of heteronormative society. Conjugal visits were permitted, but not for gay men. Many of the “patients” remained asymptomatic, yet in lieu of a cure or death they would never be released. The sanatoriums were officially disbanded in 1994 although many HIV-positive inhabitants continued to reside inside their walls. Since this period, Cuba has liberalised

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<sup>3</sup> Emilio Bejel, *Gay Cuban Nation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 102.

considerably. ART has been available free of charge for over a decade now, part of Cuba's program of universal healthcare.

Whilst Arenas was damning Castro in New York, back on the island the conflation of HIV/AIDS and resistance to Cuban communism became chillingly literal. In a disturbing series of events, a small subculture known as “rockers” (*roqueros*) or “freaks” (*frikas*) had entered into the practice of injecting themselves with syringes filled with HIV-infected blood. The *roqueros* were an unaffiliated cluster of predominantly straight-identified men who, as one *Seattle Times* columnist describes, “listened to hard rock and dressed like the long-haired musicians they saw on [the] album covers”<sup>4</sup> of the affluent and privileged North American music scene. Out of kilter with the dreams of the communist state, this group defined themselves in opposition to the emerging cultural norms of the new order; as José Quiroga asserts, in the post-Stonewall era “the Cuban government embarked on a wholesale repression of long-haired [drug-using, and gay] adolescents as dissatisfied members of society who did not belong in the transition to socialism.”<sup>5</sup> Beginning in 1989, *la vola* or “the oath” (a name given to the informal ceremony of injecting the contaminated blood) was a brazen rebuke to the political regime within Cuba. Akin to political suicides or self-immolation, this protest was nevertheless unique as it fostered the continued survival and often slow decline of the participants, participants who were now exempt from state intervention, such as mandatory conscription, participants dying at the expense of the state. “The rockers not only didn’t want to serve the revolution,” *New York Times* journalist Scott Malcomson explained, “they didn’t want to work at all. They sought disapproval and they got it.”<sup>6</sup> Castro gave Cubans a choice, “socialism or death.” The *roqueros*, for better or for worse, chose (potential) death.

These events formed the subject matter for the controversial 1994 documentary, *Cursed be Your Name, Liberty*, directed by Vladimir Ceballos and edited whilst he was studying at Brown University, having successfully claimed U.S. asylum. The film is comprised of a series of interviews conducted by Ceballos, who was himself a *roquero* (although he did not inject himself with infected blood), and tracks the effects of police

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<sup>4</sup> Frank Baker, ‘Youths In Cuba Self-Inject AIDS Virus – Filmmaker Says They Did It As Act of Political Protest,’ *Seattle Times*, January 17<sup>th</sup> 1995. <http://community.seattletimes.nwsources.com/archive/?date=19950117&slug=2099882>. Accessed December 19<sup>th</sup> 2013.

<sup>5</sup> José Quiroga, *Tropics of Desire: Interventions from Queer Latin America* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2000), 126.

<sup>6</sup> Scott L. Malcomson, ‘Socialism or Death,’ *New York Times Magazine*, September 25<sup>th</sup> 1994, 44-49. It is important to note that little coverage of these events emerged from within the country; rather, the accounts given stemmed from the investigative journalism of American reporters (for reputable newspapers) in conjunction with anonymous Cuban informants. Thus, all reports should be viewed with a degree of scepticism as the U.S. has famously positioned its politics in antithesis to communism.

brutality, the decision to become infected, the fallout, and the conditions in the mandatory state-run AIDS sanatoriums. In *Fidel: Hollywood's Favorite Tyrant* (2005) Humberto E. Fontova writes:

to these people, banishment to AIDS sanatoriums was a taste of freedom. One scene shows a *roquero* AIDS victim holding a small, crumpled American flag. With trembling hands, he scrubs it clean, then drapes it slowly across his emaciated chest. This man preferred death by inches, a lingering death of suppurating sores, constant pain, and eventual dementia to living under the rule of the man Carole King warmly serenaded with "You've Got a Friend." He gave himself AIDS because it bought him a few years of life in the equivalent of a U.S. federal prison. On Bonnie Raitt's "happy little island," he reckoned this as freedom.<sup>7</sup>

For the *roqueros* "freedom," such as it was, became conflated with the opting out of social convention made possible through the immunologically compromised body. By 1992 around 200 Cuban citizens had deliberately infected themselves with the virus.<sup>8</sup> However, processes of HIV transmission also encapsulated other transcultural negotiations. In a speech of September 1988, Castro declared: "Who was the great AIDS vector in the Third World? [...] Who brought it? The United States, that's a fact."<sup>9</sup> For Castro, HIV/AIDS was the epitome of otherness, a disease that reflected the decadence and corruption of American capitalism; in light of this, the decision to become infected represented a direct challenge to the ideals of Cuba's communist regime. Bringing infected blood within the boundaries of the body became the ultimate act of political resistance. In the process of HIV transmission, a culture was being negated and, perhaps more troublingly, a culture was being *acquired*; by injecting HIV the *roqueros* were, in effect, imbibing Americanness. For Arenas and the *roqueros* blood-mixing was embedded in rhetoric of assimilation-as-resistance, be it the infiltration of the U.S. nation-state and a Western

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<sup>7</sup> Humberto E. Fontova, *Fidel: Hollywood's Favorite Tyrant* (Washington DC: Regnery Publishing, 2005), 62.

<sup>8</sup> Shawn Smallman, *The AIDS Pandemic in Latin America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 50.

<sup>9</sup> Marvin Leiner, *Sexual Politics in Cuba: Machismo, Homosexuality, and AIDS* (San Francisco: Westview Press, 1994), 131.

In 1985, in the last years of the Cold War, a Soviet Union cartoon surfaced in *Pravda*, a political newspaper linked with the Communist Party of the Russian Federation. Entitled 'Pentagon AIDS Specialist,' the cartoon depicted a malevolent U.S. General paying a scientist for a test tube filled with contaminated blood. But the virus residing in the blood was transformed into tiny swastikas, whilst the "AIDS victim" languishes in the background, depicted as a Holocaust survivor. Here, American imperialism is conflated with Nazi fascism, whilst AIDS is positioned as the newest form of biological warfare disseminated by the American military, and by extension the Reagan administration. The connection between HIV/AIDS and the Holocaust also resonated for Jewish-American cultural producers. See Larry Kramer, *The Normal Heart* (1985) and Tony Kushner, *A Bright Room Called Day* (1985).

paradigm of disease by a Cuban dissident or the deliberate incorporation of a culturally imbued virus within those Latino bodies opting out of Cuban communism.

Thinking about acculturation and assimilation in relation to HIV/AIDS discourse and late twentieth century Cuban relocation allows us to place two discursive fields in conversation: cytology and geography. Through this conflation, focus may shift from the displacement of bodies between nations to the displacements occurring within human cells, the turbulent re-territorialising of viral RNA in human DNA that retroviruses like HIV engender. Reverse transcriptase, an enzyme found only in retroviruses, converts single-stranded RNA to double-stranded DNA so that the viral genome can enter the host genome; until 1975 this process of conversion and assimilation was thought to be impossible. In this analogy diaspora is no longer a phenomenon that happens *to* bodies or a dialogue unfolding between a transient subject and a stable nation-state. Rather, HIV can be theorised as a diasporic entity, dislocated from its “home” by the evacuation of contaminated bodily fluids and forced to put down fresh roots, encouraged to adopt the legacies and histories of its new host genome. Indeed the etymology of diaspora denotes the “scattering of seeds,” thus diaspora presents an intriguing conceptual slippage between the relocation of populations and the widespread transmission of disease through the unrestricted dispersal of infected semen, or, more colloquially, “seed.” HIV becomes the epitome of the assimilated agent, for once inside the host cell it survives *as that cell*, possessing no prior autonomy and no sense of self. Like the retrovirus, it is imagined that the repositioned body must become integrated into the dominant systems of its host country in order to flourish. For HIV-positive Cubans living in late twentieth century America assimilation is indeed a (doubly) troubling concept.

In this chapter I engage with assimilation as a process signalling the uneasy relationship between the homogenised *United States* and displaced foreign bodies *and* the absorption of HIV into host cells. In the 1980s and 90s HIV and immigration symbolised the two biggest threats to U.S. culture to such an extent that they often became synthesised.<sup>10</sup> Now the constitutionally protected U.S. citizen was placed in close proximity to that which it perceived as dangerously other. As Jennifer Brier notes, the 1987 decision to add HIV to the list of excludable diseases employed rhetoric of uncontrollable foreign bodies whose penetration of America’s borders posed a risk to Western democracy itself; for Brier the wording of this piece of immigration legislation facilitated the process

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<sup>10</sup> This is not reducible to this period alone. Cindy Patton argues that “the simultaneous discovery of bacteria and the major immigrant movement into the U.S. in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries confused the ideas of sickness and foreignness.” See Patton, *Sex and Germs: The Politics of AIDS* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1986), 11.

by which HIV/AIDS became racialised and externalised in this period.<sup>11</sup> Assimilation may be the rallying cry for earnest fantasies of harmony and a platform upon which a multicultural utopia of melting-pots and colour-blindness may be built, it may even be an injurious demand rejected by those invested in protecting the rise of the “unmeltable ethnics,”<sup>12</sup> to use Michael Novak’s striking phrase, but in actuality the seamless incorporation of “foreign agents” into the main(blood)stream of America was (and is), for most, a contested and anxiety provoking imagining.

But for Latino/a subjects other dangerous stereotypes abounded at this time. Just as pervasive as the myths of contagious immigrants was the assumption that assimilation with Anglo-American culture was a major facilitator of HIV transmission. There was some truth in this for, as Rita M. Melendez states, “although Latinos enter the country being HIV negative, they often seroconvert as they *acculturate* within the United States.”<sup>13</sup> Certainly in the context of Cuba, the American mainland was imagined as a hedonistic site of sexual liberation *and* a dangerous space haunted by the perpetual threat of contamination. In 1991 Elías Miguel Muñoz’s novel *The Greatest Performance* and Pedro R. Monge Rafuls’s play *Noche de ronda (Cruising at Nighttime)* both appeared. The former captures the interconnecting lives of Rosa and Mario as they struggle to define themselves as queer Cubanos in the U.S., negotiating sexual abuse and HIV/AIDS, whilst the latter depicts the gay Latino protagonist – Eladio, or “La Chicana” – planning his final birthday party, convinced that he will soon contract HIV and die. Now acculturation to the U.S. did not merely imply the acquisition of dominant U.S. culture and values but the acquisition of a syndrome as well.

Assimilation with U.S. culture also formed the impetus for Susana Aikin and Carlos Aparicio’s documentary *The Salt Mines* (1990) which follows the lives of mostly exiled Cuban transsexuals, inhabiting the dilapidated sanitation trucks parked at the New York City salt reserve. In the follow-up documentary *The Transformation* (1995) “Sara,” who first appeared in *The Salt Mines*, has relocated to Dallas, converted to Christianity, changed his name back to Ricardo, and married a woman. As the documentary reveals, it is

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<sup>11</sup> Jennifer Brier, ‘The Immigrant Infection: Images of Race, Nation, and Contagion in the Public Debates on AIDS and Immigration,’ *Modern American Queer History*, ed. Allida M. Black (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 253-270.

<sup>12</sup> See Michael Novak, *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics: Politics and Culture in the Seventies* (New York: Macmillan, 1971). Despite screeds against assimilation, melting-pot mentality is still a prime feature of twentieth century American politics and culture; indeed some consider the melting pot as the dominant metaphor guiding American understanding of ethnic relations.

<sup>13</sup> Rita M. Melendez et al, ‘Understanding Latina Women’s Sexuality in the United States: Analysis of an Innovative HIV Prevention Program,’ *The Cultural Context of Sexual Pleasure and Problems: Psychotherapy with Diverse Clients*, ed. Kathryn S.K. Hall and Cynthia A. Graham (New York: Routledge, 2012), 89; emphasis added.

Ricardo's discovery of his positive serostatus that has prompted the transformation, which has stirred him to abandon the salt mines, renounce his sexuality, and assimilate with what he perceives to be wholesome, normative, U.S. society, a transformation which, in the end, proves to be disingenuous; the documentary ends with Ricardo admitting, "That's what I would have liked to have been: a woman. I would still choose to be a woman."<sup>14</sup> The opening years of the 90s were marked by a surge of cultural production that sought to situate homosexuality and HIV/AIDS within the vicissitudes of Cuban nationalism and its noxious relations with mainland America.

This chapter explores assimilation in relation to the work of conceptual artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres. A gay, HIV-positive, leftist, feminist, immigrant artist (a multi-fronted challenge to traditional American values) he left his native Cuba as a child, momentarily settling in Spain before leaving for Puerto Rico. In the late 1970s he attended the University of Puerto Rico, where he primarily dedicated himself to performance art, before moving to New York City in 1979. Whilst there he attended the prestigious Pratt Institute of Art in Brooklyn and also participated in the Whitney Independent Study Program. He rose to prominence in the beleaguered art world of 1980s New York as a member of the politically engaged art collective Group Material (1979-1996), which included amongst its fluctuating roster of members prominent artists such as Julie Ault, Tim Rollins (later known for his collaborations with the South Bronx based community group 'Kids of Survival'), Doug Ashford, Karen Ranspacher, and Jochen Klein. Gonzalez-Torres died of AIDS related causes in 1996, the very year that combination therapy became available.<sup>15</sup>

1991 was one of the most prolific years of Gonzalez-Torres's career, the year he conceptualised his most thought-provoking and enduring installations. This creative rush was motivated by a devastating event in the artist's life, the premature death of his partner Ross Laycock from AIDS. The effect that Laycock's death had on Gonzalez-Torres's work cannot be overstated. In various interviews he outlines the centrality of his lover to his art-making processes: "When people ask me, 'Who is your public?' I say honestly, without skipping a beat, 'Ross.' The public was Ross. The rest of the people just come to the work."<sup>16</sup> In the wake of his death works began to appear which encoded the fragility of the body and the tenuousness of existence: piles of candies waxed and waned at the hands of greedy spectators, once robust stacks of paper wasted away and were renewed, pairs of

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<sup>14</sup> Ricardo/Sara cited in *The Transformation*, dir. Susana Aikin and Carlos Aparicio (Frameline, 1995).

<sup>15</sup> The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation was founded in 2002 and is located in Chelsea, New York. The Foundation was created to preserve the work of this legendary artist and to encourage research and the continued staging of this art around the world.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Storr, 'Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Etre un Espion,' *ArtPress* (January 1995), 24-32.  
<http://www.queerculturecenter.org/Pages/FelixGT/FelixInterv.html>. Accessed December 17th 2010.



clocks sullenly performed the asymmetrical winding down of time, a billboard photograph of an empty bed testified to the departure of two bodies. It is certainly not surprising that the vast majority of criticism that has surfaced in the intervening decades has rendered Gonzalez-Torres's work synonymous with narratives of loss, mourning, and remembrance.<sup>17</sup>

However, the early 90s also marked the fall of the Soviet Union, the end of the Cold War, and the decline of Communism in the West; this was a pivotal period in Cuban history as the utopian promise of the post-revolutionary state began to unravel. Simultaneously accused of sacrificing his Latino identity to the bland uniformity of minimalism and praised for his refusal to inhabit any fixed, marginal position which would satisfy mainstream assumptions, Gonzalez-Torres's negotiations of race, ethnicity, and nation have failed to garner much sustained critical engagement because, as José Esteban Muñoz observes, his art insisted on "speaking Latino in ways that were oblique [by refusing] familiar models of minority identity that invoke exotic colors and rituals."<sup>18</sup> But it is, I argue, irresponsible to divorce the mechanisms of dispersal, circulation, reproduction, and assimilation which suffuse his art from a historicised discussion of racial transmission and geographical relocation. I contend that when seeking to conceptualise the emergence of his work, Cuba is a slippery referent which should not be ignored, for as Linda Weintraub asserts, he

moved from a society based on collective thinking to one in which the discrete person is the essential unit of order. Gonzalez-Torres's personal revelations celebrated the privileges of U.S. citizenship. He invented ways to practice art that manifested the individual rights guaranteed by the Constitution and opinions protected by the court.<sup>19</sup>

I contend that assimilation is central to Gonzalez-Torres's artistic strategy. In a 1994 interview with Joseph Kosuth the artist declared: "I want to be like a virus that belongs to the institution. All the ideological apparatuses are, in other words, replicating themselves, because that's the way the culture works. So if I function as a virus, an imposter, an

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<sup>17</sup> See T. J. Demos, 'The Aesthetics of Mourning,' 184 *Flash Art* 65 (1995); S. B. Gambardella, 'Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Mourning, and the 'Cultural War for the Soul of America,' *Object: Graduate Research and Reviews in the History of Art and Visual Culture*, 11 (2009), 5-23; Jane Blocker, *Seeing Witness: Visuality and the Ethics of Testimony* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 29-50; Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed, *If Memory Serves: Gay Men, AIDS, and the Promise of the Queer Past* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 186-200.

<sup>18</sup> Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 166.

<sup>19</sup> Linda Weintraub, Arthur Danto, and Thomas McEvelley, ed., *Art on the Edge and Over: Searching for Art's Meaning in Contemporary Society 1970s-1990s* (Litchfield: Art Insights Inc, 1996), 110.

infiltrator, I will always replicate myself together with the institutions.”<sup>20</sup> Here Gonzalez-Torres positions himself as the virus which ingratiate itself into the privileged, institutionalised body not as a radical dissident but as part of that body, a form nestled inside each cell which now belongs. In an oblique move, integration belies a burgeoning subversion, for what Gonzalez-Torres is in fact advocating is not assimilation but rather a negotiation and strategic infiltration of the institutions of U.S. power; he retains his own agenda but he will also eagerly exploit the reproductive capacities of the dominant order to help spread this agenda. The virus, the impostor, the infiltrator, the immigrant, and the other need not be sacrificed to the insipid inertia of the melting-pot, he insists. They need not collude in their own disappearance or set themselves in direct opposition to dominant institutions. For Gonzalez-Torres, negotiation *becomes* insubordination.

In the following three sections I shall explore assimilation as a feature of his art-making practice. I begin by evoking Jean Baudrillard’s reading of simulation as a process that blurs the distinction between original and copy. Primarily focusing upon Gonzalez-Torres’s spill and stack pieces I argue that these installations function as simulacrum to belie facile renderings of imitation-as-assimilation. I follow this with a discussion of memes: cultural molecules that proliferate like viruses in late twentieth century mechanical production. Likening memes to viruses, for both disseminate through myriad forms of contact (which does not necessarily require proximity), I build upon Josh Takano Chambers-Letson’s important discussion of the “viral strategy” pervading Gonzalez-Torres’s art-making practices. I end by thinking about reproduction as a subversive technique which reverberates in narratives of viral dissemination, homosexual stagnation, and Latino/a fecundity in this period. I contend that Gonzalez-Torres champions mass reproduction, utilising it as an aesthetic which mimics assimilation-as-multiculturalism through the covert annihilation of otherness.

## **A Simulation is not Assimilation**

*Untitled (21 Days of Bloodwork – Steady Decline)*, created by Gonzalez-Torres in 1994, charts an unknown subject’s negotiation with information [Figure 2]. In this installation, comprised of 21 identical graph-like illustrations, infected blood is represented by straight red lines, sanitised sanguineous smudges which plummet diagonally across the white

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<sup>20</sup> Joseph Kosuth and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, ‘A Conversation,’ *A. Reinhardt, J. Kosuth, F. Gonzalez-Torres: Symptoms of Interference, Conditions of Possibility*, exhibition catalogue, ed. Clare Farrow, Art & Design profile series (London: Camden Arts Center, 1994), 76-81, 76.

canvas. The realities of HIV infection, and the accompanying economies of desire, are submerged and occluded beneath the stark scientific representations of decline. Gonzalez-Torres unmasks HIV as a rootless, arbitrary, and invisible signifier positioned in a tumultuous barrage of discourse, in which illness and health are only discernible as marks on paper. Indeed for the asymptomatic patient HIV is only knowable through other modes of representation: a blood test (which in actuality does not detect HIV but rather the presence of HIV antibodies), a T-cell count, a graph, a diagnosis. The real has not been substituted for signifiers of the real; the real has never existed outside of these very signifiers. In this scientific paradigm, disease manifests within the shady recesses of (mis)representation. HIV is unmasked as a perfect simulacrum, an unstable signifier devoid of a referent.

As the first cases of a mysterious new disease were appearing amongst gay men in the U.S., French philosopher Jean Baudrillard published the influential postmodern treatise *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981). Rooted in Ancient Greek philosophy, simulacra were resituated in the annals of postmodern discourse by the arrival of this seminal study. Baudrillard positions the simulacrum as an entity which infinitely repeats through society's own image-producing mechanisms, an entity which blurs the divisions between the literal and the figural. From the very beginning, he outlines the theoretical allure of simulacra: "Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal."<sup>21</sup> In a vertiginous vista where any division between the signifier and the signified has been obliterated, Baudrillard conjures an endless parade of stuttering images made real by a lack of stabilising originals which define them through contrast as devalued copies. Simulation cannot be a mere imitation of some knowable referent; rather, simulation implies a radical disturbance of what we believe to be reality. "In the topos of simulacra," Michael W. Smith contends, "any distinction between the represented image and reality vanishes as the historical contexts in which images were produced are effaced by their (re)production and circulation."<sup>22</sup> For Smith, the medium becomes the message.

My invocation of Baudrillard in this chapter is unabashedly tongue-in-cheek, as in February 1987 Group Material presented a show at the White Columns gallery, a legendary New York alternative art space situated in SoHo at the time, entitled *Resistance (Anti-*

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<sup>21</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* [1981], trans. Shelia Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994), 1. Baudrillard considers simulation as a specifically North American phenomenon, which later spreads across the world.

<sup>22</sup> Michael W. Smith, *Reading Simulacra: Fatal Theories for Postmodernity* (Albany: State University of New York, 2001), 2.

*Baudrillard*). The transcript of the exhibition proposal states: “A theoretical jungle surrounds us. Overgrown from inactivity, this jungle harbors real dangers – the dissolution of history, the disfiguration of any alternative actuality, and the attempt to disown practice. Activism is perceived as illusory in an illusory culture.” In this lacuna the counterstance that the collective wished to enact named “a resistance born from necessity and genuine day-to-day existence.”<sup>23</sup> For Group Material, Baudrillard’s interventions were being appropriated to neutralise the specificity of politicised rage in a swath of discourse, flattening activism into a submissive and inert conceptual wasteland. For the collective this was a dangerous turn which heralded the “end of the political” at the close of the twentieth century. At this moment in the U.S., art would need to transgress its own limits to eschew uniformity and confinement, resist the urge to conflate style with criticality, and resurrect a politics rooted in the everyday experiences of the people rather than in any abstract or idealised theoretical treatise.

How does HIV function in relation to simulation? What is at stake when the conflation of image and reality occurs around the representation of HIV/AIDS? And if simulation ensures the dismantling of reality’s gilded cage, can the image of disease, the iconography that *stands in for* the disease, be understood as literal contagion? Stephen Dougherty notes that “in the age of simulation the virus is the perfect monster with which to frighten ourselves. It is a copy without an original; it is information without context, and thus without meaning.”<sup>24</sup> Although Dougherty acknowledges that viruses have been systematically aligned with those bodies “that have served as models in the Western world for what is always potentially monstrous and infectious,”<sup>25</sup> a prejudicial assumption reactivated in the wake of AIDS, his position is clear: the virus stands beyond representation, not external to but in excess of. Thus HIV is not merely a biomedical aberration and a slippery signifier but a simulacrum, an entity with no stable origin that crystallises through discourse which precedes what the concept is and dictates what it is imagined to be.

But can we, or rather should we, apply a treatise denouncing the very possibility of reality to an epidemic that genuinely devastated (and continues to devastate) entire

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<sup>23</sup> The exhibition also showcased Barbara Kruger’s installation, *Why I Am Not Anti-Baudrillard*, a title which paraphrased the theorist himself. According to Julie Ault, whilst Baudrillard was in New York participating in a conference he was handed an invitation to the exhibition by a White Columns employee. After reading it he was heard to say with dismay “but this is anti-Baudrillard.” The exhibition proposal, an overview of the show and the anecdote are reproduced in *Show and Tell: A Chronicle of Group Material*, ed. Julie Ault (London: Four Corners Books, 2010), 118-119.

<sup>24</sup> Stephen Dougherty, ‘The Biopolitics of the Killer Virus Novel,’ *Cultural Critique* 48 (2001), 1-29, 10-11.

<sup>25</sup> Dougherty, ‘The Biopolitics of the Killer Virus Novel,’ 11.

communities? From its onset, critics have approached HIV/AIDS as a flurry of disparate representations. Indeed Group Material's most iconic exhibition *AIDS Timeline*, first staged in 1989, presented the epidemic as a constructed amalgamation of (re)appropriated artefacts, texts, images, and discourses produced over the course of the 1980s in the U.S. rather than as a cogent syndrome rooted in scientific knowledge [Figure 3]. Two years previously Douglas Crimp had hypothesised that "AIDS does not exist apart from the practices that conceptualize it, represent it, and respond to it."<sup>26</sup> Paula Treichler had dubbed AIDS an "epidemic of signification."<sup>27</sup> In 1990 Cindy Patton would release a book entitled *Inventing AIDS*. To complicate matters further, AIDS, unlike HIV, only materialised as a *lack*, a dearth of immunity. AIDS confounded scientists for it had no easily discernible place of origin, no antecedents, and no prior model to refer to. Although the iconography of AIDS was bred from stereotypes and assumptions that already had currency in the West, the syndrome soon took on a life of its own. AIDS not only illuminated the fallibility of representation in this period, it arrived as a brazen disruption, ruffling the feathers of previous models of signification. Writing on AIDS as simulacrum, Cesare Casarino observes:

AIDS and its suffering had to be spectacularized at all costs because the threats it posed to dominant forms of representation – and not least of all to scientific and medical representation – were bound to generate new images that might challenge and evade the logic of the spectacle altogether, were bound to give new life to the power of the simulacrum. In this sense, the spectacle of AIDS needs to be understood not only as a reactionary backlash against past and present critiques of representation but also as a preemptive strike against the simulacrum of AIDS and its future possibilities.<sup>28</sup>

As Casarino contends, HIV/AIDS did more than merely index a postmodern crisis of representation; it functioned to illuminate the very constructedness of representation itself. To imagine (and image) AIDS therefore became an exercise in murky conceptualisations which worried the line dividing the figural from the literal. If HIV (as the "actual" pathogen of the new disease) signified through its potential to *become* AIDS (the "figural" cacophony of opportunistic infections), and thus to become other than itself, it courted its own annihilation, its own slide into a Baudrillardian abyss of the unreal. As curator Nancy

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<sup>26</sup> Crimp, 'AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism,' 28.

<sup>27</sup> Treichler, 'AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse,' 32.

<sup>28</sup> Cesare Casarino, 'The Simulacrum of AIDS,' *Parallax* 11:2 (2005), 60-72, 67.

Spector acknowledges, *Untitled (21 Days of Bloodwork – Steady Decline)*, the installation that I analysed at the beginning of this section, “*indexes* a present state that will soon no longer be; it maps a topos of life on the verge of death.”<sup>29</sup>

However, conceptualising HIV as a simulacrum obscures another problematic slippage between HIV and the human genetic material that this virus mimics. In ‘Dangerous Liaisons: Health, Disease and Representations’ Roberta McGrath argues that HIV is a “simulacrum of DNA.”<sup>30</sup> As innocuous and fleeting as this comment invariably is, it is nevertheless rather revealing. It seems probable that McGrath uses “simulacrum” haphazardly here to suggest that HIV holds a *likeness* to DNA, that she flourishes this term to fix HIV as an intriguing semblance of DNA which nevertheless lacks the authenticity of the original. In McGrath’s analogy HIV is an instigator of misrecognition, an irreverent trickster that, once inside the sanctuary of the host cell, ensures its own continuous proliferation. But I contend that McGrath fails to consider the potential *and* the repercussions of aligning HIV and DNA through the concept of the simulacrum. Once snugly assimilated into the human DNA strand, the retrovirus no longer *simulates* DNA but actually *becomes* it via reverse transcription; it splices itself in and, in doing so, effaces the stability of the referent (DNA) which it is meant to merely mimic. Any distance between “the real” and “the figural” has been lost. Furthermore, the very synthesis of HIV with DNA reveals how the virus-as-simulacrum comes to hijack alternative regimes of representation, to reproduce itself along with normative (or rather normalised) narratives of replication, namely the copying of genetic material prevalent (the passing on of DNA) in heterosexual reproduction. HIV becomes a spectre haunting the very concept of sanctioned reproduction; indeed the knowledge that mothers could pass HIV onto their unborn children shadowed representations of newborn babies as innately pure.

Writing on cellular replication, prominent evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins declares:

Cellular machinery is so friendly towards DNA duplication that it is small wonder cells play host to DNA parasites --- viruses, viroids, plasmids and a riff-raff of other genetic fellow travellers. [...] Deadly oncogenes are almost impossible to distinguish from the legitimate genes between which they are spliced. In evolutionary time, there is probably a continual traffic from “straight” genes to “outlaw,” and back again. DNA is just DNA. The only thing that distinguishes viral DNA from host DNA is its expected method of passing into future generations.

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<sup>29</sup> Nancy Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, Guggenheim Museum, New York: March 3<sup>rd</sup>-May 10<sup>th</sup> 1995, 120.

<sup>30</sup> Roberta McGrath, ‘Dangerous Liaisons: Health, Disease and Representations,’ *Ecstatic Antibodies: Resisting the AIDS Mythology*, ed. Tessa Boffin and Sunil Gupta (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1990), 144.

“Legitimate” host DNA is just DNA that aspires to pass into the next generation via the orthodox route of sperm or egg. “Outlaw” or parasitic DNA is just DNA that looks to a quicker, less cooperative route to the future, via a sneezed droplet or a smear of blood.<sup>31</sup>

Dawkins’s description is certainly buckling under a plethora of unnerving connotations. Viruses, and a veritable “riff-raff” of other disreputable “parasites,” become deadly “fellow travellers” feasting on the hospitality of “legitimate,” if naive, host genes. The non-normative, “outlaw” viral DNA is positioned as a furtive, lazy, uncooperative, opportunistic nomad, desperately monopolising any modicum of bodily fluid – any hastily relinquished droplet or smear – to ensure its ticket to futurity. This stands in sharp contrast to the aspiring “straight” gene, which passes onto the next generation through the “orthodox” merging of sperm and egg.

However, as Dawkins observes, once this synthesis has occurred any distinction between viral DNA and host DNA becomes irrelevant; “DNA,” he insists “is just DNA,” all distinctions have been effaced, all differences have been equalised. In a disorienting move it is possible to imagine a scenario in which a virus acquired through same-sex contact (aligned with stagnation in a homophobic imaginary) ingratiate itself into the genetic archives of its host and survives *as* DNA, the hallowed symbol of legacy, heritage, and futurity, and the sacrosanct property of heterosexual procreation. Transcribing from viral RNA to human DNA, HIV transmission undermines any prior belief in the linearity of DNA to RNA transference (that “1960s bioreligious, Nobel Prize-winning ‘joke,’”<sup>32</sup> as Donna Haraway terms it), just as queer sexualities threaten the very “naturalness” of heterosexuality and the structures upon which heteronormativity resides. HIV undermines DNA’s hold on originality; DNA is not the model, just as HIV is not the mimic. Viewed in this way, did the arrival of antiretroviral therapy in the mid-90s hail a return to the virus as other? Was there held within each new “miracle” pill the potential to inhibit the ability of viral RNA to “pass” for DNA? Did protease inhibitors work to purge “legitimate” DNA of “outlaw” DNA, to liberate the beleaguered reproductive mechanisms of each cell, and to expose HIV as a pale imitation, an unwanted imposter?

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<sup>31</sup> Richard Dawkins, ‘Viruses of the Mind,’ *Dennett and His Critics: Demystifying Mind*, ed. Bo Dalhborg (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1993), 14.

<sup>32</sup> Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Books, 1991), 206. She continues: “The Central Dogma was about a master control system for information flow in the codes that determine meaning in the great technological communication systems that organisms progressively have become after the Second World War. The body is an artificial intelligence system, and the relation of copy and original is reversed and then exploded.”

It is my contention that Gonzalez-Torres's spill and stack pieces – mass-produced piles of paper or candy offered up to the viewing (and paying) public – function as simulacra, because they derive their meaning from their ability to signify, proliferate, and reproduce without the grounding presence of some procreative antecedent. Viewed as simulacra these installations become rather disturbing. In various interviews Gonzalez-Torres states that the candy spills seek to simulate the wasting body, and especially the body of his partner Ross.<sup>33</sup> Indeed the 1991 installation *Untitled (Loverboys)* consisted of the weights of Gonzalez-Torres and Laycock's bodies combined as candy spills, a weight that would decrease as the spectators removed the candy. Therefore, if the spills symbolise the diminishing body with HIV/AIDS and if the simulacrum embodies the real, then the candy becomes metamorphosed into HIV, each capsule imbued with the deadly virus. To follow this analogy to its inevitable conclusion, when invited to take the candy and ingest its deceptive sweetness, the spectator is encouraged to take the virus itself inside their body, to become *conceptually and literally* infected.

The alignment of the spills and the simulacrum has, I would argue, been hinted at in earlier discussions of Gonzalez-Torres's oeuvre. In the exhibition catalogue accompanying his 1995 Guggenheim show in New York Spector writes: "viewed as static objects, these pieces mimic the solidity and singularity of sculpture, but, metaphorically, they closely resemble the photographic edition. In essence, the stacks and candy spills are *copies of objects for which there is no original*."<sup>34</sup> Spector animates the potential of these pieces to destabilise art-making practices in the twentieth century; here mass production becomes the *meaning* of the work. Similarly, in her exploration of the edition as artistic mode, Susan Tallman explores the problematic bifurcation of traditional sculpture and the spill and stack pieces, asking the reader to contrast "the single, potent, assertive object, which takes charge, extends itself into the world at large, even strives to govern the physical and psychological circumstances around it" with "the multiple, adaptable, *social* character of the edition, content to be different things to different people."<sup>35</sup>

Although Tallman seeks to highlight the slippage between high art and low art, a debate at the centre of twentieth century art history, I nevertheless find her remarks

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<sup>33</sup> Susan Tallman positions the spills as sentimental mementos, writing "the initial volume of candies is based on the weight of specific people, and therefore in some sense represents human bodies." See Tallman, 'Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Social Works,' *Parkett* 39 (1994), 66. What I find most disturbing about this comment is her lack of specificity, her refusal to mention the weighty influence that the AIDS epidemic had on his work; indeed neither AIDS nor Ross Laycock (one of the "specific people" imagined in the spill) are awarded any mention.

<sup>34</sup> Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 95: emphasis added.

<sup>35</sup> Susan Tallman, 'The Ethos of the Edition: The Stacks of Felix Gonzalez-Torres,' *Arts Magazine* (September 1991), 14: emphasis in original.



troubling, primarily because they seem to evoke barely contained sexual stereotypes, stereotypes which bolstered negative representations of homosexuals and people with AIDS in this period. Constructing sculpture as either a “single, unrepeatable, urgent rush of creation” or a parade of “multiple, recurrent pleasures”<sup>36</sup> works to construct an intractable binary of extending, potent, monogamous heterosexualised tradition on the one hand, and adaptable, pleasure-seeking, even promiscuous homosexualised imitation on the other, a debased position which is satisfied (Tallman prefers the passivity of “content”) through the interpretative gaze of others. Certainly the “single, potent, assertive object” which penetrates the “world at large” is saturated with rhetoric of virile masculinity and phallocentrism; artistic authenticity is manifested as a spurt of creation rather than circumvented by the promise of non-normative pleasures. By naturalising the split between the unique work of art and the edition, is Tallman tacitly fixing homosexuality as a pale imitation of heterosexuality? In *Gender Trouble* Butler explodes this dynamic, arguing that “the replication of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original. Thus, gay is to straight *not* as copy is to original, but, rather, as copy is to copy.”<sup>37</sup> For Butler, sexuality fails to materialise as a pre-actualised state; all notions of origins, all illusions of fixity are obscured by the endless production and proliferation of identity. Performativity renders all sexual identity a simulation. Indeed the perniciousness of heteronormativity seems to be its ability to endow heterosexuality with an aura of authenticity, as an original state that generates only subjugated, imperfect replicas. Butler reveals that heterosexuality’s grasp on originality is, at best, tenuous.

Although claiming to write for the spill and stack pieces, Tallman’s praise seems hollow when juxtaposed with the glaring elisions in her argument, those moments in her critique which are woefully irreflexive. Take, for example, her comments on the ephemerality and multiplicity of the edition: “it has been generally assumed that concentrated power is more effective than dispersed power. That Gonzalez-Torres should willingly choose the latter over the former suggests that power may not be his aim.”<sup>38</sup> Is she positing this choice as ineffectual? Certainly power remains endowed with unquestioned superiority and privilege here; indeed she fails to intuit the potential of embracing powerlessness, the desire to be without power, and in particular fails to question the assumption that concentrated power is more effective than dispersed power. For those

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<sup>36</sup> Tallman, ‘The Ethos of the Edition,’ 14.

<sup>37</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 43.

<sup>38</sup> Tallman, ‘The Ethos of the Edition,’ 14.

identities forged in relation to dispersal (emigrants and exiles, for example) concentrated power is often adversely punitive; these demographics often choose alternative structures that rethink the validity of power dynamics, a process Tallman does not acknowledge. Furthermore, Tallman's critique is fundamentally erroneous; in a conversation with artist Joseph Kosuth Gonzalez-Torres makes his position blatant: "At this point I do not want to be outside the structures of power, I do not want to be the opposition, the alternative. Alternative to what? To power? No. I want power."<sup>39</sup>

By embracing assimilation as a pathway to power, Gonzalez-Torres subtly evokes earlier discourses on mimicry and acculturation. Since the 1970s, mimicry has become "the new slogan of postcolonial literary analysis,"<sup>40</sup> whilst "the mimic" has been positioned as an empowered being, tactically negotiating mainstream power structures, *and* as a "fractured subject marked by a permanent sense of lack."<sup>41</sup> Imitation is often viewed with scepticism by postcolonial theorists because it serves to reduce the visibility and thus the potency of difference. For the purposes of this chapter, colonial mimicry is intriguing because it performs a slippage between what is represented and what is *meant* to be represented, which remains a shady referent, "a strategic limitation or prohibition *within* the authoritative discourse itself";<sup>42</sup> as Homi Bhabha argues, "mimicry *repeats* rather than *re-presents*,"<sup>43</sup> it acts suspiciously like the simulacra. Gonzalez-Torres does not view mimicry as ineffectual; rather he encourages mimicry in and through his artwork (the spills and stacks emulate sculpture whilst simultaneously favouring the mercurial over the monolithic) in order to infect mainstream ideology with his own subversive agenda, as I discuss in the following section. If "the success of colonial appropriation depends on a proliferation of inappropriate objects that ensure its strategic failure, so that mimicry is at once resemblance and menace,"<sup>44</sup> as Bhabha posits, the proliferation of the spills and stacks (taken by the spectator beyond the gallery walls) undermines the privileging of the traditional art-forms that it mimics, becoming a *resemblance* and, in so doing, becoming a *menace*.

In 1991 (that pivotal year, the year of Ross Laycock's death) twenty four identical billboards depicting a black-and-white photograph of a deserted bed showing the

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<sup>39</sup> Kosuth and Gonzalez-Torres, 'A Conversation,' 76.

<sup>40</sup> Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 150.

<sup>41</sup> Albert J. Paolini, *Navigating Modernity: Postcolonialism, Identity, and International Relations* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999), 58.

<sup>42</sup> Homi Bhabha, 'Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,' *The Location of Culture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1994), 123.

<sup>43</sup> Bhabha, 'Of Mimicry and Man,' 125.

<sup>44</sup> Bhabha, 'Of Mimicry and Man,' 123.

indentations of two departed bodies, were replicated throughout the topography of New York City [Figure 4]. No text accompanied the image. No explanations were given. No identifications were encouraged. Yet these billboards have remained arguably the most controversial and analysed works of Gonzalez-Torres's career. Although utilising a photograph, a medium that purports to reflect truth, reality, and social transparency, the image is very consciously staged, the bed placed at a dramatic, unnatural angle with the indentations emphasised, the light hazy, both suggestively post-coital and pregnant with elegiac gloom. The neutrality of the photographic medium is compromised, questioned, and inherently skewed. That the billboard is left untitled, devoid of any text that could anchor the image or narrow and direct interpretation perhaps most decisively exposes Gonzalez-Torres's subversive agenda. The bed is left without context, without any specificity which may sculpt meaning. The bed – a simultaneously erotic and banal space, epitomising sensuality and stagnation – may connote an economy of sexual exchange, yet its positioning in a public arena is neither inherently subversive nor radical; indeed safe sex campaigns often employ the bed (dishevelled, glamorised, highly suggestive and seductive) as a universally recognised symbol of consensual sexual choice, the only communally legitimised site for sexual expression. However, these campaigns rely on the caption, the text – simplistic, stylised, and unambiguous in its moral standpoint – to dictate how the viewer must interpret the image, the emblazoned marks performing (rather than merely reflecting) the proliferation of mainstream sexual values. Indeed Roland Barthes surmises that text, when used to anchor meaning, always acts to repress the liberty of signification, a suppression which Gonzalez-Torres works against, utilising ambiguity as a strategic intervention.<sup>45</sup>

It is clear that Gonzalez-Torres refuses to comply with any facile system of representation – avoids detection as it were – for any insistent, inflexible stance, any attempt to portray the homosexual body with AIDS at this time in the U.S. would have invariably bolstered the ideological mandate of mainstream AIDS discourse and rhetoric validating regimes of compulsory heterosexuality. As Simon Watney notes in *Imagine Hope: AIDS and Gay Identity* (2000):

His work is initially distinguished by his refusal to engage in a dualistic cultural politics which strives to counter the widespread demonizing of people with AIDS with an equally over-simplified (if understandable) tendency to heroize them.

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<sup>45</sup> Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fortuna Press, 1977), 40-41.

Rather, he has stepped away from contestation which is directly grounded on the bodies of people with AIDS and their representations.<sup>46</sup>

The bed billboard works within the cracks of dominant ideology, reappropriating a familiar image whilst disengaging with representations of people with AIDS which entrench reductive dichotomies, choosing instead to focus on the issues, pervasions, and discussions which *frame* the portrayal of the epidemic, employing absence as a strategy. The very space of this absence – the sunken recesses of two bodies imprinted on the mattress – indexes a rupture in representation, an indelible cut that dissects the validity of staging non-normative desire in this period. Invariably, in the midst of an epidemic dominated by the dual markers of visibility (inscribed in the iconography of KS lesions) and invisibility (the emaciated, wasting person with AIDS and the ostensibly robust, undetected HIV-positive interloper permeating mainstream rhetoric), the “AIDS body” became a battleground, and to represent this body constituted the taking up of arms. Gonzalez-Torres displays the body by removing the body.

However, Richard Meyer questions Gonzalez-Torres’s choice to dispense with the corporeal form:

Such strategies of erasure may [...] court a different kind of danger, namely, that they mimic invisibility so well as to enact the very suppressions they seek to elude. To put the problem another way, we might ask whether works such as [...] the bed billboards reinforce, however unintentionally, the external threat of censorship to which gay artists are subjected.<sup>47</sup>

For Meyer, this conscious rejection of the body is an ineffectual response to the “culture wars” of the 1980s and 90s, a period of dissent which brought artistic practices (especially those deemed homoerotic) to the forefront of moralistic and political crusades in the U.S. In antithesis, Spector reads this “refusal to reproduce mimetically the body” as a courageous act, as “a deliberate attempt to *dephallicize* aesthetic vision, to resist visual mastery, [and] to renounce the objectification of his subjects.”<sup>48</sup> Spector fashions Gonzalez-Torres with agency once more, seeing his rejection of corporeality in favour of invisibility as a self-actualising and decisive move.

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<sup>46</sup> Simon Watney, *Imagine Hope: AIDS and Gay Identity* (London: Routledge, 2000), 156.

<sup>47</sup> Richard Meyer, *Outlaw Representation: Censorship and Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century American Art* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 268.

<sup>48</sup> Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 144.

I wish to end this section by exploring in greater depth this rejection of the body. As Baudrillard asserts, “simulation threatens the difference between the ‘true’ and the ‘false,’ the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary.’”<sup>49</sup> It seems clear that, for Baudrillard at least, simulation is a menacing proposition, one which “threatens” to unhinge truth from falsity and reality from illusion, to plunge us into chaos. In this analogy the simulacrum always marks the site of annihilation, the loss of the real. However, how can we conceptualise this loss when the death of the referent signifies more than just the subjugation of the real to the onslaught of representation but the decimation of the corporeal form, the death of *real bodies*? This question became achingly pertinent for Gonzalez-Torres upon Laycock’s death in 1991. In the years preceding his death, the artist had consciously encoded the dissolution and circulation of Laycock’s wasting body in his ephemeral spill and stack pieces. “In a way this ‘letting go’ of the work, this refusal to make a static form, a monolithic sculpture, in favour of a disappearing, changing, unstable, and fragile form,” Gonzalez-Torres admitted in a 1993 interview with his Group Material colleague, Tim Rollins, “was an attempt on my part to rehearse my fears of having Ross disappear day by day right in front of my eyes.”<sup>50</sup> However, after 1991 this “letting go” ceased to be merely symbolic. In an article published in *POZ* magazine posthumously commemorating the artist and his partner, close friend Carl George recounts: “[Ross] asked to be cremated and to have his ashes separated into 100 sealed plastic bags. That way Felix could leave bits of Ross, his ‘only audience,’ his ‘public of one,’ wherever he travelled.”<sup>51</sup> Even the body of the beloved is subject to Gonzalez-Torres’s ethos of free distribution; by breaking down the body into small, autonomous parts he is able to expand the signifying import of the original structure which in itself was never anything more than a simulation of some unknowable referent.

This strategy of dispersal foregrounds the contemporaneous anger-fuelled antics of ACT UP, which in the early 1990s assimilated political funerals (an already well established tactic adopted by oppressed minorities) into their AIDS activism. In October 1992 the infamous Ashes Action took place in Washington DC. In a flyer accompanying the march the organisers from ACT UP/New York stated: “Now it is time to bring AIDS home to George Bush. On October 11<sup>th</sup>, we will carry the actual ashes of people we love in funeral process to the White House. In an act of grief and rage and love, we will deposit

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<sup>49</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 3.

<sup>50</sup> Tim Rollins, ‘Interview with Felix Gonzalez-Torres,’ *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (New York: Art Resources Transfer Inc., 1993), 13.

<sup>51</sup> Carl George, ‘You Can Take It With You: The Public Life of Felix Gonzalez-Torres,’ *Poz* (December 1998). [www.poz.com/articles/234\\_1677](http://www.poz.com/articles/234_1677). Accessed February 1st 2011.

their ashes on the White House lawn” [Figure 5]. In an interview conducted by Sarah Schulman for The ACT UP Oral History Project, ACT UP facilitator David Robinson, the driving force behind the event and one of the volunteers elected to carry the ashes of his lover to the gates of the White House, silently at first and then amidst a barrage of drums, chants, screams and wails from the swelling crowd, remembers the action:

That was the weekend of the, the Quilt was being shown. And I had gotten to the point where I felt the Quilt was being used mostly in a really dangerous way. It was being used – now George Bush Senior would read names [...] But a lot of us agreed that – we wanted to show the truth of, the unvarnished truth; don’t pretty this up in any way. What has come out of this epidemic? It’s ashes, it’s bone chips [...] The word we had put out, the ground rule was, you were not supposed to bring, this was not going to be a fake-blood action. The idea was, you don’t need anything fake. This is really, we want to show what have really been the consequences of this administration’s, and the previous ones’ action [...] we threw the ashes, dumped the ashes, threw the urns, whatever. People say depo-, it wasn’t depositing the ashes.<sup>52</sup>

In 1987 Simon Watney gave an account of mainstream violence performed against the spectacle of the homosexual body that is eerily prescient of the Ashes Action:

the “homosexual body,” which is also that of the “AIDS victim,” must be publicly seen to be humiliated, thrown around in zip-up plastic bags, fumigated, denied burial, lest there be any acknowledgment of the slightest sense of *loss*. Thus the “homosexual body” continues to speak after death, not as a memento mori, but as its exact reverse, for a life that must at all costs be seen to have been devoid of value, unregretted, unlamented, and – final indignity – effaced into a mere anonymous statistic. The “homosexual body” is “disposed of,” like so much rubbish, like the trash it was in life.<sup>53</sup>

ACT UP deliberately adopted strategies of violence and erasure performed against dissident subjects, yet appropriated them as powerful signifiers of grief and alternative acts of memorialisation. They trivialised and disposed of the ashes of their loved ones as a deliberate rebuke to mainstream negation.

But this action was not just designed to shock the viewing public, it was also a spectacle designed to usurp tired representations of illness (which were quickly losing their efficacy and potency) with a literal confrontation with death. As ACT UP/New York member David Feinberg argues in his outrageous and poignant memoir *Queer and*

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<sup>52</sup> This is taken from an interview between David Robinson and cultural historian Sarah Schulman. Interview Number: 082, July 16 2007, Tape II, 00:45-00:50, 59-61. This interview forms part of the ACT UP Oral History Project, a collection of first person accounts archiving the history of ACT UP, coordinated by Schulman and Jim Hubbard. <http://actuporalhistory.org/interviews/image/robinson.pdf>. Accessed September 23rd 2012.

<sup>53</sup> Watney, ‘The Spectacle of AIDS,’ 80.

*Loathing: Rants and Raves of a Raging AIDS Clone* (1994), “SILENCE = DEATH is a metaphor, after all. This [action] is no metaphor. We carry death itself.”<sup>54</sup> For Feinberg, “Silence=Death” becomes the perfect postmodern adage, a signifier infinitely divorced from the signified, a signifier percolating in an endless network of other signifiers. Lee Edelman writes:

as a text produced in response to a medical and political emergency, “Silence=Death” is a stunningly self-reflexive slogan. It takes the form of a rallying cry, but its call for resistance is no call to arms; rather, *it calls for the production of discourse*, the production, that is, of more text, as a mode of defense against the opportunism of mainstream medical and legislative responses to the continuing epidemic.<sup>55</sup>

The Ashes Action demonstrated a shift in ACT UP’s political and aesthetic agenda, a move from a highly stylised dissemination of rhetorical ephemera (such as the endlessly proliferating discourse engendered by the Silence = Death slogan) to the horrifyingly literal interaction with death by those who were themselves dying. It seems significant, as Robinson recounts, that the Action was staged the same weekend that the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt was displayed in the Nation’s capital; it emphasises the contemporaneous yet asymmetrical relationship between the exhibition of the Quilt (as a *symbol* of grief) and the exhibitionism of the Ashes Action (as a *performance* of grief). As ACT UPer Avram Finkelstein, the artist who conceived of the now iconic Silence = Death posters, declares, “Action is the real Quilt.”<sup>56</sup> At this time ACT UP began to rebel against antiseptic representations of suffering; they produced posters and flyers bearing the legends, “You Can’t Lick a Stamp if You’re Dead” and “We Have Turned Our Anger into a Piece of Quilt and Red Ribbon.” At this time, dominant forms of representation were unable to truly capture the horror of the experience; it seems apparent that in a postmodern age AIDS perpetually oscillates from the jarringly figural to the devastatingly literal, corroding the border between the two.

## **Infectious Ideas**

In 1989 Gonzalez-Torres was commissioned to erect a billboard commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the groundbreaking Stonewall uprising. The billboard loomed

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<sup>54</sup> David B. Feinberg, *Queer and Loathing: Rants and Raves of a Raging AIDS Clone* (New York: Penguin, 1994), 256.

<sup>55</sup> Edelman, *Homographesis*, 87: emphasis added.

<sup>56</sup> Avram Finkelstein, ‘The Other Quilt,’ *QW*, October 25<sup>th</sup> 1992, 22.

over Sheridan Square in Greenwich Village, the site of the Stonewall Inn, a pitch black expanse adorned with two rows of sedate white lettering located near the bottom which read: *People with AIDS Coalition 1985 Police Harassment 1969 Oscar Wilde 1895 Supreme Court 1986 Harvey Milk 1977 March on Washington 1987 Stonewall Rebellion 1969* [Figure 6]. Most critiques of this installation detail the slippage between public and private which is enmeshed in the narrative of gay and lesbian liberation in the West. For in a deliberate move, the soaring spectacle was incongruous with the artist's statement, a written replica which accompanied the billboard. One date was altered. Whilst the billboard memorialised the year Oscar Wilde brought a libel suit against the Marquis of Queensbury and was subsequently arrested for gross indecency, the typed statement recorded another significant date: 1891, the year a now famous photograph of Wilde was taken. As Gonzalez-Torres attests, "my intention was not to replicate the image of the billboard in a different medium. This print, which will support the entire project, is meant as a more private and personal object."<sup>57</sup> But 1891 was also the year that the amended (that is to say, censored) version of Wilde's controversial novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was first published. Read this way, the billboard also seems to document legacies of oppression and censorship curtailing homoerotic aestheticism, an anger reignited by the culture wars of 1990s America.

The interplay between public and private belies a more subversive bent and facilitates a more audacious agenda. Gazing up from the crowded metropolis below, the viewer of the billboard was unknowingly witnessing a stealthy attack on the very nerve centres of Western culture, a covert displacing of traditional structures of power and authority. For encoded in each date was not merely an event but a *negotiation*, a decidedly queer negotiation of the ideological systems and practices undergirding Anglo-American hegemony by "sexual dissidents," be it the health care system (by the People with AIDS Coalition), the police (by the patrons of the Stonewall inn), the courts (by Wilde and Hardwick), the government (by Milk and the hordes of protestors descending on Washington D.C. demanding gay rights and AIDS treatments), or indeed capitalism itself (by the appropriation of the orthodox billboard as a mechanism of *unorthodox* dissemination). Here queerness becomes that which can disturb, in both senses of the word, normative and normalising institutions. By documenting the historical events engendered by the actions of wilful, dissenting queers, Gonzalez-Torres was performing a queer infestation of the very repositories of national power; in an ingenious move, the marks of

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<sup>57</sup> Felix Gonzalez-Torres, 'Artist's Statement,' New York, 1989. Reprinted in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Julie Ault (Göttingen: Steidl/Dangin Publishing, 2006), 198.



outward resistance now contained the traces of strategic infiltration. Through language and art he was instigating his own agenda and transmitting his own message. He was injecting the marginalised, the invisible, and the oppressed covertly, yet defiantly, into the vital organs of mainstream power and the exclusionary narratives of U.S. history. Gonzalez-Torres was out to infect his audience, not through their bodies, but through their minds.

As an aside, it is important to note that the celebration of the Stonewall uprising was double edged for Gonzalez-Torres, as it worked to memorialise a very specific narrative of white-inflected, U.S. gay liberation which, as cultural critic José Quiroga argues, did not resonate for citizens of the post-revolutionary Cuban state. Indeed, he positions Stonewall as “just one more piece of American culture exported for consumption,”<sup>58</sup> as a hyper-signified event colluding in the imperialist project of democratising and universalising lesbian and gay experience within a U.S. model, a model which did not resonate for citizens of the post-revolutionary Cuban state. Certainly the dates selected by the artist work to place the experiences of queers of colour under erasure; like the billboard itself, black (as the most recognisable contrast to whiteness) forms the background upon which agency can be inscribed, in white.

This section explores the ways in which assimilation is enacted by the reproduction of ideology between minds, imaginations, or brain-pools. When chronicling the history of an epidemic that devastated (and continues to devastate) entire communities, not just through the spread of a deadly virus but, perhaps more significantly, through the pernicious dissemination of fear, ignorance, and blame, the transmission of information cannot be readily discounted. In *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* (1991), artist, writer, and AIDS activist David Wojnarowicz proclaimed: “My rage is really about the fact that when I was told that I’d contracted this virus it didn’t take me long to realize that I’d contracted a diseased society as well.”<sup>59</sup> Tim Dean makes a similar observation, noting that “along with what came to be known officially as the human immunodeficiency virus, enigmatic messages were transmitted through sexual contact.”<sup>60</sup> For Wojnarowicz and for Dean, it is clear that what was being implanted during processes of HIV infection transcended a corporeal encounter alone. The transmission of a virus facilitated the transference of discursive and rhetorical infrastructures, and vice versa. What was occurring could now be imagined as infection via memetic emissions, invasive ideas contaminating and affecting the mind.

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<sup>58</sup> Quiroga, *Tropics of Desire*, 192-193.

<sup>59</sup> Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives*, 114.

<sup>60</sup> Tim Dean, ‘Bareback Time,’ *Queer Times, Queer Becomings*, ed. Ellen Lee McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen (Albany: State University of New York, 2011), 90.

In the mid-1970s Richard Dawkins tempered earlier forays into Darwinian evolutionary biology that retained the elision of cultural conditioning in trajectories of human social progression. Building upon his groundbreaking work on gene science, Dawkins coined the term “meme” in the bestselling *The Selfish Gene* (1976) to name a “new replicator” analogous to the gene, a “unit of cultural transmission” propagated through the transportation of ideas between brain-pools, disseminating via potentially infinite processes of *imitation*.<sup>61</sup> Memes are productive when discussing queer cultural production because, unlike genes, they do not rely on economies of sexual difference to ensure their creation or replication; memes are not in deference to gender roles, nor are they contoured by the pressures of normative sexual object choice, although they may indeed be made susceptible to these particularities. Memes enter the mind by any means possible. In this sense, memes, it can be deduced, are viral commodities.

Nevertheless, for Dawkins, the *replication* of cultural artefacts, structures, and signifiers in the mind echoes the *reproduction* of genetic material in the body through procreative sex: “Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation.”<sup>62</sup> The tacit alignment of memetics and genetics fixes the meme as a quasi-biological replicator, a fertile seed taking root in the womb-like recesses of the mind. The image of genes and memes “leaping” between bodies and brains is redolent with phallogentric overtones; certainly “leaping” infers the thrusting, spurting transference of significant “substance,” naturalising ejaculation as the arbiter of both genetic continuity and creative insemination. The transmission of ideas (mingling to create “the soup of human culture”<sup>63</sup>) is likened to the transference of genetic material, a conflation which Tony Sampson challenges, arguing that “what spreads cannot, beyond analogy, become unitized like a gene or, for that matter, be made concrete. What spreads has no *organized* unit or molar body.”<sup>64</sup> By employing the modifier “just as” Dawkins certainly seems to move the commingling of memes and genes beyond the realm of mere metaphor. Furthermore, Dawkins’s description of genes moving between bodies via sperm *or* eggs (rather than by the crucial synthesis of the two) is undoubtedly perplexing; I argue that HIV can be assimilated into the genetic archives of human cells via the depositing of

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<sup>61</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* [1976] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 192.

<sup>62</sup> Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 192.

<sup>63</sup> Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 192.

<sup>64</sup> Tony D. Sampson, *Virality: Contagion Theory in the Age of Networks* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 62.

infected semen during homosexual intercourse, but this hardly chimes with Dawkins's analogy.

My reading does, however, resonate with the views of Dawkins's colleague Nicholas Keynes Humphrey, cited in *The Selfish Gene*. "Memes should be regarded as living structures, not just metaphorically but technically," he surmises, "When you plant a fertile meme in my mind you literally parasitize my brain, turning it into a vehicle for the meme's propagation in just the way that a virus may parasitize the genetic mechanism of a host cell."<sup>65</sup> Humphrey acknowledges that, like a virus nestled in the human DNA strand, a meme may enter the brain and assimilate, ensuring its own replication and dissemination via the appropriation of this organ, this sedentary repository of genetics. Whilst viruses trouble the line between life and death (because they signify as life-like simulations) and survive through human contact, so the meme may endure indefinitely, transmitted across spatial and temporal boundaries via fluid networks of often fleeting contact; as Malcolm Gladwell asserts, "a meme is an idea that behaves like a virus – that moves through a population, taking hold of each person it infects."<sup>66</sup> Through only one communicable meme, a whole populous may become contaminated.

However, to posit the human brain as an inert receptacle ripe for colonisation by parasitic outside agents, to view it as "a dung heap in which the larvae of other people's ideas renew themselves,"<sup>67</sup> to borrow Daniel Dennett's evocative metaphor, is nevertheless problematic and reductive. Any notion of symbiotic relationality or intellectual autonomy is forfeited to the advancement of a voracious, self-serving other, the potential of *hybridised* brain-pools which, through the annihilation of purity and exclusivity, break with homogeneity is not addressed. That being said, Dennett's choice to describe the meme as the "larvae of other people's ideas," feasting on a fetid bog of grey and white matter, is particularly intriguing, conjuring the image of a juvenile form destined to metamorphose into another entity, an entity that does not necessarily reflect the evolutionary history of its parent or its species. To read memes as genetic mimics is to suggest that memes have a perceivable origin, a parent meme from which all subsequent memes descend. But to align the meme with the parasite (which is, after all, a symbiont in another guise) undermines this rhetoric, imagining the meme as a transient, hybrid unit.

Is knowledge innate or acquired, a product of inheritance or a by-product of contagious thoughts? Do we inherit memes, or do we acquire them? And how can a

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<sup>65</sup> Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 192.

<sup>66</sup> Malcolm Gladwell cited in Louis Rowitz, *Public Health for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Prepared Leader* (Sudbury: Jones and Bartlett Publishers, 2006), 370.

<sup>67</sup> Daniel C. Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1991), 202.

discussion of memetics inform and extend HIV/AIDS discourse in this period? It seems no coincidence that memetics congealed as a field of investigation in the mid-1980s, at the height of the AIDS crisis (or rather AIDS-as-crisis) in the West, for whilst the former colonises the mind, the latter colonises the body. Both question the “naturalness” of the repositories they encounter. Just as virologists have argued that viruses innately question what it means to be alive, to be human, because they exist as a quasi-species (the repercussion of which I discuss in more detail in the following chapter), memes “restructure a human brain in order to make it a better habitat for memes.”<sup>68</sup>

In the January 1995 edition of *ArtPress*, there appeared an interview between Robert Storr and Gonzalez-Torres, published just ahead of his important exhibition at the Guggenheim in New York. In the introduction to the piece Storr divulges the impetus for not only the interview but also the upcoming show: “Criticized as being a politically correct artist, Gonzalez-Torres strikes back in the following interview, calling for a veritable guerrilla war – intelligent and undercover – against the plethora of straightforward, moralizing works of art with their angry-young-man messages.”<sup>69</sup> At the beginning of the interview Gonzalez-Torres states:

I don’t like this idea of having to undermine your ancestors, of ridiculing them, undermining them, and making less out of them. I think we’re part of a historical process and I think that this attitude that you have to murder your father in order to start something new is bullshit. We are part of this culture, we don’t come from outer space, so whatever I do is already something that has entered my brain from some other sources and is then synthesized into something new.<sup>70</sup>

This insight seems to hold some startling contradictions and deserves greater consideration. Here Gonzalez-Torres acknowledges his indebtedness to past generations, consciously positioning himself in an unfolding narrative of collaborative cultural production extending and retracting in linear time. Curiously, this rhetoric plays upon notions of collaboration as a vector of biological inheritance *and* inverts this essentialism, emphasising the interpenetration of disparate influences. Mobilising against the “murder of the father” – which intrinsically plots the artist in an asymmetrical process of transference, the artist now reminiscent of a repository of influences transferred through the generations – Gonzalez-Torres nevertheless imagines the conduction of ideas in a collective pool of culture, where memes extracted from others ingratiate themselves into his mind to generate

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<sup>68</sup> Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, 207: emphasis added.

<sup>69</sup> Storr, ‘Felix Gonzalez-Torres.’

<sup>70</sup> Storr, ‘Felix Gonzalez-Torres.’

new cerebral progeny. The contracting of art itself constitutes, as Storr surmises, a guerrilla war, an irregular and sneaky invasion from an exterior location that enters the mind, is transformed and continues.

This negotiation of subjectivity as both inherited and acquired is rather interesting. In the meme-as-gene, meme-as-germ (leaping from one existing phenotype to another existing phenotype, as Gordon Graham explains<sup>71</sup>) analogy, Gonzalez-Torres walks the dividing line. When asked in an interview why his work contained no overtly politicised Latino content he quipped, “I’m not a good token. I don’t wear the right colors. I have my own agenda.” He continues:

[Latinos] have an assigned role that’s very specific, very limited. As in a glass vitrine, “we” – the “other” – have to accomplish ritual, exotic performances to satisfy the needs of the majority. This parody is becoming boring very quickly. Who is going to define my culture? It is not just Borges and García Márquez, but also Gertrude Stein and Freud and Guy Debord – they are all part of my formation.<sup>72</sup>

Gonzalez-Torres’s emphasis on the fixity of Latino/as in the context of late twentieth century U.S. identity politics may also be juxtaposed with phobic constructions which figure Latino/as as dangerously transgressive; in nationalist rhetoric this may equate to the penetration of the nation-state, the dissembling of borders, and the contamination of rigid racial categories, as I discussed in the previous chapter. The acceptable, healthy Latino/a citizen then is often tied to notions of stasis and containment, resigned to a sanctioned place, an economic class, and a racial group. Therefore, the mechanisms of dispersal deployed in his spill and stack pieces, the unfettered circulation of mass produced art should also be read within the purview of racial repression and competing narratives of Latino/a containment and expansion. To return to my rendering of viral mestizaje, I contend that the artist is infusing (often debased) Latino/a identity with a fierce, insistent, viral agency – a freedom to move, to infiltrate space, to penetrate others and to *be* penetrated – which functions outside of the evolutionary unfolding of racial groupings, ethnic communities, and biological family units. Gonzalez-Torres is clearly exploring a false slippage between culture as ties of solidarity predicated on race, ethnicity, and nationality, and culture as rhizomes of socialisation. In this scenario non-Latino/as transmit their ideas and influence across the illusory boundaries of nation and time, which

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<sup>71</sup> Gordon Graham, *Genes: A Philosophical Inquiry* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 86.

<sup>72</sup> Rollins, ‘Interview with Felix Gonzalez-Torres,’ 17.

subsequently seep into the artist's makeup, to disrupt the hegemony of race and ethnicity as naturalised markers of identification, a conflation that often serves to prop up mainstream agendas: "some people want to promote multiculturalism as long as they are the promoters, the circus directors."<sup>73</sup> It seems that, for the artist at least, identity is *contracted* rather than *bred*.

However, it would be foolish to assume that Gonzalez-Torres merely positions himself as a guileless vessel, imploring a plethora of diverse influences to enter his mind and swell his creative purview; he also represents himself as a subtle vector of ideological contagion, transmitting his message through the dissemination of his artwork (or meme vehicles, although he does not use this phrase). This constitutes a radical subversion of not only mainstream art practices in this period but also of any inflexible identity politics. As Josh Takano Chambers-Letson argues, in a particularly excellent critique of Gonzalez-Torres's work, his installations enact resistance through assimilation, embrace alterity through incorporation, and by adopting a "viral strategy," disseminate the agenda of the artist. Now the artist becomes both the receiver of quasi-collaborative influences and the transmitter of thought producing (or rather reproducing) memes. As artist Ross Bleckner noted in a 1995 edition of *BOMB* magazine, Gonzalez-Torres's work is covertly and cyclically contagious: "It is subtle, it keeps *coming back into my mind*. And it is compelling."<sup>74</sup>

It would seem that Gonzalez-Torres held contradictory attitudes toward the production, reproduction, and distribution of art at the end of the twentieth century. He pontificated on the ephemerality and adaptability of his art – "I destroy the work before I make it"<sup>75</sup> – but he would also write complex and often strict contingencies and limits into the certificates of authenticity which restricted how the buyer could stage his work. An acclaimed and sought-after artist, he exhibited his work at the most prestigious museums and galleries in the U.S. and Europe; but he also filled these spaces with Latino go-go boys in skimpy silver briefs dancing on platforms studded with lights and created artwork that spectators could actually take away with them. This is wonderfully portrayed by the spill and stack pieces, as visitors to Gonzalez-Torres's exhibitions were actively encouraged to remove a candy or a sheet of paper, to chip away at the work to the detriment of the integrity of the whole, its depletion eerily (and deliberately) reminiscent of the wasting body, a frequently deployed visual icon for AIDS. But what were the spectators enacting

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<sup>73</sup> Rollins, 'Interview with Felix Gonzalez-Torres,' 17.

<sup>74</sup> Ross Bleckner, 'Felix Gonzalez-Torres,' *BOMB* 51 (Spring 1995): emphasis added.

<sup>75</sup> Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 122.

by removing these works from the space of the gallery? What were they taking with them? What was being transferred? “The virus is the critique,” Chambers-Letson contends, “Breaking down the artwork into tiny pieces that are picked up or ingested by spectators, and thus spread far and wide as a result of a single spectator’s contact, transforms each piece into a carrier of the viral agent that latches onto the spectator as a new host.”<sup>76</sup> The notion that art may become a “carrier” of the virus seems significant, as from the moment of its detection HIV has manifested itself rather curiously. Long, often asymptomatic incubation periods transform people from fleeting receptacles or inert victims (traditional representations of people with a disease) into potentially undetectable, rigorous, sexually-active, viral breeding grounds; as Judith Williamson attests, because AIDS entered into a language of blame and homophobia that already existed, an atmosphere developed in which specific groups of people, rather than viruses, became viral.<sup>77</sup>

However, when the spectator comes into contact with the artwork, the potential for infection is simultaneously coercive and consensual, for although Chambers-Letson advances the image of a parasitical virus tenaciously taking possession of its host, infection can only occur if the spectator *chooses* to interact with the installation. In 1994 *Untitled (Blood)* was staged for the first time. The installation consisted of a stately floor to ceiling curtain of densely packed and shimmering red and white glass beads, reminiscent of red and white blood cells [Figure 7]. To continue through the gallery space the spectator had to move through this prosthetic wall, connecting briefly and chaotically with the work. The decision to physically engage with the installation (purposefully beautiful and tactile) became a matter of personal choice, but it also highlighted the illogical fear that mere proximity to HIV may lead to infection; the beads may represent infected or indiscriminate blood (the parenthetical title directly indexes fears over HIV-infected blood) yet the choice to touch them never holds any real danger. Gonzalez-Torres raises questions of culpability without invoking tired rhetoric of innocence or guilt.

*Untitled (Blood)* concocts narratives of physical and metaphorical infection. A meme, like a virus, requires absorption into the human form; as Kathryn Bond Stockton astutely acknowledges of the symbiotic necessity prevalent in Saussurean linguistics, “a sign, in order to be a sign to you, must get inside your body,”<sup>78</sup> must enter through orifices, those cracks of vulnerability. An effective meme then must interact with (Stockton prefers

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<sup>76</sup> Josh Takano Chambers-Letson, ‘Contracting Justice: The Viral Strategy of Felix Gonzalez-Torres,’ *Criticism*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (Fall 2010), 559-587, 562.

<sup>77</sup> Judith Williamson, ‘Every Virus Tells a Story: The Meanings of HIV and AIDS,’ *Taking Liberties: AIDS and Cultural Politics*, ed. Erica Carter and Simon Watney (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1989).

<sup>78</sup> Kathryn Bond Stockton, *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame: Where “Black” Meets “Queer”* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), 194.

the word “invade” here) the body as well as the mind. But how does Gonzalez-Torres negotiate this elision between mind and body? I believe this interaction is best illuminated in his iconic candy spill pieces. Undeniably sensual, the candy sculptures stand in for the body, depicting it as irresistibly malleable, pleasure derived from the taking of the desired object (solidified as capsules of tantalising sweetness) inside the boundaries of the self. That Gonzalez-Torres utilises an edible substance as a material of artistic expression is significant; the product has an in-built expiration date, an implied and innate mechanism for self-destruction. When art is materialised through food (which always has the capacity to be transformed into another – less desirable – substance) it relinquishes its hold on immortality, it sets itself against the enduring work of genius, and thus (like the body it imitates) shall perish. Gonzalez-Torres offers up “this sugary thing,” a delectable morsel that “you put in your mouth and you suck on someone else’s body. And in this way, [the] work becomes part of so many other people’s bodies.” The erotic frisson that he captures here – “It’s very hot”<sup>79</sup> – is countered by the unsettling realisation that the sucking and swallowing of the candy piece not only imagines the sexualised interpenetration of bodies but also mimics processes of HIV infection, for if the artist intends for these candies to represent viral particles then once ingested (and more significantly digested), once assimilated as part of the spectator’s body and absorbed into their blood, the candies enact the metaphorical territorialising of the virus within each body. Here biological assimilation, imagined as a naturally occurring function, figuratively facilitates the transmission of HIV. Corporeal penetration engenders ideological insemination, the virus is ushered in inside the meme-vehicle. The body becomes the infected vessel yet, through the undetected transmission of the artist’s ideology, the mind becomes the host.

It is important to read this abundance of sugar within the complexities of the multiple positionalities that Gonzalez-Torres seamlessly encompasses and sneakily disseminates. The 1990 piece *Untitled (Placebo)*, a carpet-like sweep comprised of thousands of candies in silver wrappers, evokes early clinical trials which distributed sugar pills to desperately ill AIDS patients (in the placebo control group) rather than potentially life-extending medications [Figure 8]. By taking a candy the spectator buys into the ambiguity: she does not know what she has been given, but she takes it anyway, exhibiting blind faith in the benevolence of the institution and the integrity of the system. Commenting on a piece entitled *USA Today* (1990), consisting of a pile of red, white and blue suckers [Figure 9], the artist offers another rendering, dubbing it a “sugar rush” akin to the soaring fervour of patriotism, a false high tempered by an inevitable crash: “But then

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<sup>79</sup> Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 147-50.



you come down.”<sup>80</sup> In both analogies, sugar is something tantalising that nevertheless performs another rhetorical function. As Gonzalez-Torres freely admits, he utilised sugar to tempt the viewing public, to encourage the spectator to view and to ingest his art. In one anecdote, he recounts a scene he covertly witnessed when *Untitled (Placebo)* was exhibited at the Hirshhorn Museum:

There was this suburban white, middle class mother, with two young sons who came in the room and in thirty seconds, this [guard] – who was a black, maybe church-going civil servant in Washington, in the middle of all this reactionary pressure about the arts – there she was explaining to this mother and kids about AIDS and what this piece represented, what a placebo was, and how there was no cure and so on. Then the boys started to fill their pockets with candies [...] The whole thing worked because then they *got* the piece.<sup>81</sup>

The use of sugar becomes a device to lure people to these pieces, encouraging them to engage in conversation about complex, controversial issues with people of different classes and races. Because the mother and her children “got” the piece (they were allowed to possess it) they felt, and Gonzalez-Torres felt, that they had “got” it, that they had understood.

Gonzalez-Torres’s overt use of sugar not only enacts an erotic encounter, nor simply encompasses narratives of medicalised decline or ineffectual patriotism. Indeed artist Ernesto Pujol writes: “I have always been struck by his use of the Caribbean’s overwhelmingly blue sky; by the abundance of sugar, so Cuban, in his work.”<sup>82</sup> Blue is certainly a recurring colour in his art: it is ambiguous, it incites curiosity. For Gonzalez-Torres blue is a colour of racialised passion. In *Untitled (Loverboys)* the artist chooses blue and white swirled candies to represent the union of his white lover and himself, two bodies rendered in *two different colours*, brought together as a miscegenated mass [Figure 10]. Blue is a colour of pain and loss. Commenting on Gonzalez-Torres’s 1993 interview with Tim Rollins, Patrick Moore observes that “Rollins repeatedly questions Gonzalez-Torres about the shade of blue that appears in so many of his pieces; the artist evades the question even though he had told close friends that the blue was the blue of Ross’s hospital gown.”<sup>83</sup> Blue is a sexed colour. “The beautiful blue [...] has a gender connotation; you

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<sup>80</sup> Robert Nickas, ‘Felix Gonzalez-Torres: All the Time in the World,’ *Flash Art* 24, no. 161 (Nov/Dec, 1991), 86-89, 89.

<sup>81</sup> Storr, ‘Felix Gonzalez-Torres: emphasis added.

<sup>82</sup> Cited in Kristin G. Congdon and Kara Kelley Hallmark, *Artists from Latin American Cultures: A Biographical Dictionary* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002), 101.

<sup>83</sup> Patrick Moore, *Beyond Shame: Reclaiming the Abandoned History of Radical Gay Sexuality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), 167.

can't get away from that," Spector asserts.<sup>84</sup> Blue is also a colour of repression. In Cuba, the inhabitants of the AIDS sanatoriums were required to wear uniform blue pyjamas day and night.<sup>85</sup>

In relation to Cuba sugar is also a substance percolating in complex economies of colonisation, transculturation, and imperialism. As a sought-after commodity, sugar signifies (over)consumption. The focus on consumption stands in antithesis to the communist ideals of the post-revolutionary Cuban state: the candy spills represent the desires of a society "where gluttony, a kind of sub-species of Late-Capital, might be the order of the day."<sup>86</sup> They are a deliberate repudiation of the communist regime in Cuba. But the candy spills also index the expansion of sugar exportation from Cuba following Spanish conquest. Indeed as Gustavo Pérez Firmat claims, sugar in Cuba was the "agricultural equivalent of empire,"<sup>87</sup> a foreign import, a vestige of African slavery. Intriguingly, this burgeoning economy flourished due to the arrival of the Cuban railway system, marking the overt reliance of the *object* on the *means of distribution*, a dynamic so wonderfully captured by Gonzalez-Torres in these pieces, each particle of sugar deriving its significance from the mechanism of dispersal employed. There is something decidedly subversive in this analogy, for if the candy represents the virus then the state-sanctioned, normative vessels that facilitate circulation (the host repositories) become the very vectors of contagion, participating in their own inevitable demise.

Gonzalez-Torres sought to work within the cracks of mainstream discourse. He wanted to be part of the system: "we should not be afraid of using [...] formal references, since they represent authority and history. Why not take them? When we insert our own discourse into these forms, we soil them. We make them dark. We make them our own and that is our final revenge."<sup>88</sup> This striking imagery allows us to imagine a new, hybrid discursive network, a theoretical dynasty penetrated (and perverted) by the artist's own envisioning, impregnated with a suggestively racialised aesthetic, a once pure "they" now sneakily suffused with a dark, vengeful "we." The artist is simultaneously exploring the

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There certainly seems to be some connection between Ross and the colour blue, as indexed in the 1989 piece *Untitled (Loverboy)* which consists of a gently swaying blue curtain at a window. This blue appears again in *Untitled*, with the seductive appendage "Loverboys" in parenthesis, in which the ideal weight of the artist's body and that of Ross Laycock, were combined and metamorphosed into a multitude of blue and white swirled candies, two separate masses brought together, mingling and inseparable on the floor of the gallery.

<sup>84</sup> Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 62.

<sup>85</sup> Guillermina De Ferrari, *Vulnerable States: Bodies of Memory in Contemporary Caribbean Fiction* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), 78.

<sup>86</sup> Terry Atkinson, 'Rites of passage,' *A & D*, 1 / 2, Jan/Feb, 1994.

<sup>87</sup> Gustavo Pérez Firmat, *The Cuban Condition: Translation and Identity in Modern Cuban Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 56.

<sup>88</sup> Felix Gonzalez-Torres cited in Bleys, *Images of Ambiente*, 210.

acquisition of discourse, the collaboration between subjects and texts. Just like the Sheridan Square billboard, emblazoned with writing that subtly encodes queer negotiations of state power, Gonzalez-Torres is asserting a viral agenda, appropriating any formal strategy, any medium, any discursive tract that would, that could, hold his vision, that could reproduce his agenda. He positioned himself as willing receptacle and eager transmitter, as a virus of the body and a contagion of the mind.

## **Reproducing Sameness**

In 1991 Gonzalez-Torres conceived the installation *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)*, a now iconic piece that positions two industrial clocks side by side on the gallery wall, stark reflections of each other, both set to the same time, eking out symmetrical existences [Figure 11]. Jane Blocker reads this piece as an intervention into the fraught legal, political, and moral terrain of same-sex marriage in the U.S. This pairing can never officially be conjoined; their identical appearance forbids it. But here they enter into a contract, their ability to proportion time (their innate function) sanctioned by the existence of the other.<sup>89</sup> Indeed this very juxtaposition illuminates the tragedy of this piece, for despite their external similarities these clocks are mortal, reliant on outside sources of energy, and therefore cannot endure. They will wind down sporadically and asymmetrically, one will tire and stop whilst the other shall continue. On a more personal level, the clocks once again testify to the fear and sorrow Gonzalez-Torres experienced as he watched his partner die from AIDS. In a note the artist scrawled to Ross Laycock in 1988 he declares: “Don’t be afraid of the clocks, they are our time, time has been so generous to us. We are synchronized, now and forever. I love you.”<sup>90</sup>

Here the harmonious coupling of two clocks, the conscious embrace of symmetry and formal aesthetics becomes a subversive frisson, an act of wilful resistance through covert assimilation. For Nicolas Bourriaud this rejuvenation of sameness embodies a return to art as beauty; on “a constant quest for simplicity and formal harmony” he effuses, this work “assaults neither eye nor feelings. Everything about it is implicit, discreet and fluid.”<sup>91</sup> To me, Bourriaud’s comments seem dreadfully superficial. Certainly Gonzalez-Torres sought to produce work that would sink beneath the radar of petty sensationalism by

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<sup>89</sup> Blocker, *Seeing Witness*, 34.

<sup>90</sup> Julie Ault, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 155.

<sup>91</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Les Presses du Réel, 1998), 63.

bucking stereotypes of “gay art.” In a wonderful anecdote Gonzalez-Torres illuminates this confluence:

When I had a show at the Hirshhorn, Senator Stevens, who is one of the most homophobic anti-art senators, said he was going to come to the opening and I thought he’s going to have a really hard time explaining to his constituency how pornographic and how homoerotic two clocks side-by-side are. He came looking for dicks and asses. There was nothing like that.<sup>92</sup>

Senator Stevens and Bourriaud both fail to envision the inflammatory potential of placing two identical clocks side by side, of creating artwork that mimics formal strategies and traditions; for what *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)* so compellingly delineates is a startling slippage: that symmetry, as a feature of art and design, is canonised and yet, as a feature of sexuality, is rendered pathological. For Bourriaud, this may not constitute an assault to either eye or feelings but is, I would argue, through its flagrantly unapologetic stance, a strident rebuke to homophobic or heteronormative sensibilities, a definite, most deliberate act.

Reproduction is a central device deployed by Gonzalez-Torres in this period, a mechanism deployed to gloriously explode the sacrosanct production of exclusive and exclusionary artwork, which basks in the dispensation of otherness and negates the pervasive spectacle of privileged, life-inducing heterosexual exchange. When discussing assimilation as simultaneously a creative strategy of endless proliferation, a racialised negotiation of North American culture, a normalising of non-heterosexual pairing, and a feature of viral transmission, reproduction becomes key, the ground zero upon which a multitude of anxieties reside. In his 2008 discussion of what he terms “the Latino threat narrative” Leo Ralph Chavez claims that although the “excessive” sexuality and unfettered fecundity of non-white and immigrant bodies has long garnered negative connotations – “Race, immigration, and fertility have formed a fearsome trinity for much of U.S. history”<sup>93</sup> – in the last decades of the twentieth century this vitriol was directed almost entirely at Latino/a populations living in the U.S. Indeed anxiety was focused not merely on the reproductive function of Latino/a bodies but on what was produced, offspring of (potentially) indiscriminate status, immigrant foetuses who were now children of the U.S.

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<sup>92</sup> Storr, ‘Felix Gonzalez-Torres.’

<sup>93</sup> Leo Ralph Chavez, *The Latino Threat: Constructing Immigrants, Citizens, and the Nation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 71.

For Chavez, Latina/o reproduction is constructed within pre-existing narratives of “leaky national borders, porous bodies, and the permeable category of citizenship.”<sup>94</sup>

The replication of HIV became a charged phenomenon in this period, for just as “the Latino threat narrative” implicates the presumed benevolence of the U.S. state in the unchecked reproduction of Latino progeny within its borders, HIV is seen to monopolise the reproductive functions of human cells to ensure its proliferation and survival. Indeed, ART was deemed successful because it performed an inhibiting gesture, the lessening of viral reproduction in the cells of the infected host. It seems clear that the threat that HIV posed in the first two decades of the epidemic was the promise of unrestricted production, the endless ability to replicate and circulate. In this last section I wish to consider how Gonzalez-Torres appropriates mechanisms of reproduction to explore the representation of Latinos within U.S. borders, the replication of HIV in the body, and the production of sexual sameness without the stultifying spectre of heterosexual exchange.

Thus what is at stake in the reproduction of sameness? In an essay entitled ‘The Hell of the Same’ Jean Baudrillard takes as his subject the clone, a quasi-metaphorical entity mired in discourse, a manufactured copy that proliferates through regimes of sameness:

Clones. Cloning. The piping of humans *ad infinitum*, based on the fact that any cell of an individual organism may become the matrix of an identical individual [...] The dream, then, of an eternal twinning as replacement for sexual procreation, with its link to death. A cellular dream of scissiparity – the purest form of parenthood in that it allows us at last to dispense with the other and go directly from the one to the same. This is a unicellular utopia which, thanks to genetics, gives complex beings access to the fate of the protozoans.<sup>95</sup>

What, Baudrillard asks, could orientate humans towards a primordial form of replication, towards a complete rejection of otherness? In the advent of postmodernity, the clone has been evoked to imagine a world liberated from the dominant ideal of heterosexual exchange, a catalyst for sexual, gender, and racial equality that signifies through the democratisation of homogeneity. In this sense the clone has become the metaphorical index for twentieth century feminist and queer attempts to physically and theoretically splinter sex from procreation, and to liberate kinship from the shackles of reproductive essentialism. Indeed clones were even invoked to name the emergence of a particular facet

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<sup>94</sup> Chavez, *The Latino Threat*, 72.

<sup>95</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena* [1990], trans. James Benedict (London: Verso, 1993), 130.

of post-Stonewall gay male culture that primarily developed in urban enclaves across North America.<sup>96</sup> That Baudrillard chooses to use “twinning” to displace procreation hints at a redefinition of familial affinity as that which expands horizontally rather than extends vertically.

However, as Baudrillard illustrates, cloning does not allow us to dispense with rhetoric of procreation altogether; rather the clone, through the promise of endless reproducibility, ensures the continuous production and privileging of systems of inheritance, linear extendibility (be it horizontally or vertically) and uncontaminated parenthood derived through splitting rather than multiplication. Similarly, cloning does not ensure equality across difference for, as Luciana Parisi argues, the promise of cloning may liberate the female body from its supposed destiny as a procreative vessel yet simultaneously “the patriarchal dream of independence from nature and from the female body is also completely reached.”<sup>97</sup>

Baudrillard concludes this essay with a rather telling statement:

Alienation is no more: the Other as gaze, the Other as mirror, the Other as opacity – all are gone. Henceforward it is the transparency of others that represents absolute danger. Without the Other as mirror, as reflecting surface, consciousness of self is threatened with irradiation in the void.

The utopia of the end of alienation has likewise disappeared. The subject has not succeeded in negating himself as subject, within the framework of a totalization of the world. A determinate negation of the subject no longer exists: all that remains is a lack of determinacy as to the position of the subject and the position of the other. Abandoned to this indeterminacy, the subject is neither the one nor the other – he is merely the Same. Division has been replaced by mere propagation. And whereas the other may always conceal a second other, the Same never conceals anything but itself. This is our clone-ideal today: a subject purged of the other, deprived of its divided character and doomed to self-metastasis, to pure repetition.

No longer the hell of other people, but the hell of the Same.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> “Gay Clones” often conformed to stylised notions of “macho” masculinity and normative gender, adopting specific hairstyles, fashions, and pastimes that worked to form a new, uniform social gay archetypes. See Martin P. Levine, *Gay Macho: The Life and Death of the Homosexual Clone*, ed. Michael S. Kimmel (New York: New York University Press, 1998). Although Levine hypothesises that the beginning of AIDS marked the end of the gay clone, the adage “clone” was certainly circulating in the 1980s and 90s. “The late eighties gave us the New Clone, with his multiple earrings, backward baseball cap, gym body, and severe haircut. The New Clone could be found at the gym, at ACT UP meetings, at Queer Nation demonstrations, and on Fire Island. In the postmodern nineties perhaps fifty percent of the gay men in New York City are seropositive. Inevitably, health status has mutated into a fashion statement.” See Feinberg, *Queer and Loathing*, 217.

<sup>97</sup> Luciana Parisi, *Abstract Sex: Philosophy, Biotechnology and the Mutations of Desire* (London: Continuum, 2004), 3.

<sup>98</sup> Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil*, 140. Here Baudrillard adopts Jean-Paul Sartre’s famous adage that “hell is other people.”

I find Baudrillard's continued recitation of the self/other split slightly archaic and reductive, out of kilter with the symbiotic promise of viral interpenetration. His concern over the propagation of sameness becomes, however, an intriguing point of departure. Whilst it may be argued that the eradication of otherness envisions a future devoid of persecution or prejudice – the erosion of the dehumanising “gaze” – Baudrillard refutes this, imagining and mourning the simultaneous loss of individuality and difference. His choice of language is particularly startling here, boldly encoding the violence that the annihilation of otherness indexes: “purged” implies a brutal expunging, an extreme cleansing in antithesis to “*pure* repetition” (which resonates with eugenic rhetoric of racial purification); “deprived” bemoans a sacrificed multiplicity; “divided” hints at hybridity yet simultaneously fixes difference as a binary opposition; “self-metastasis” envisions the endless transference of malignant, diseased matter flaccidly repeating in a torpid evolutionary purgatory. It is clear that, for Baudrillard, the clone inevitably marks a caesura in any historical progression, a violent castration of alternative realities, narratives sacrificed to the defunct repetition of the here and now.

However, does this rejection of sameness and tacit championing of reproduction inflame homophobic rhetoric? As Wayne Koestenbaum notes, “to consider replication degrading is, literally, homophobic: *afraid of the same*.”<sup>99</sup> In ‘The Final Solution’ – an agitating title, implicitly aligning cloning with the Nazi death camps – Baudrillard writes: “In evolutionary terms, the victory goes to beings that are mortal and distinct from one another: the victory goes to us.”<sup>100</sup> It would seem that, for Baudrillard at least, procreative extendibility through genetic diversity has won the day. Lee Edelman is keen to note the heteronormative bent:

Naturalizing this trajectory from the replication he associates with genetic immortality to the procreation made possible by encountering sexual, and therefore genetic difference, Baudrillard sounds the note of futurism's persistent love song to itself, its fantasy of a dialectic capable of spinning meaning out of history, and history out of desire.<sup>101</sup>

Although Edelman's repudiation of reproductive futurism has heavily influenced queer theorising over the past decade, various critics have argued that this negation is

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<sup>99</sup> Wayne Koestenbaum, ‘Wilde's Hard Labor and the Birth of Gay Reading,’ *Engendering Men: The Question of Male Feminist Criticism*, ed. Joseph A. Boone and Michael Cadden (Abingdon: Routledge, 1990), 182-183.

<sup>100</sup> Jean Baudrillard, ‘The Final Solution: Cloning Beyond the Human and Inhuman,’ *The Vital Illusion*, ed. Julie Witwer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 7.

<sup>101</sup> Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 62.

exclusionary, that the focus on sexual sameness obscures a plethora of highly significant differences. In a nevertheless deferential response to Edelman, José Esteban Muñoz writes:

Theories of queer temporality that fail to factor in the relational relevance of race or class merely reproduce a crypto-universal white gay subject that is weirdly atemporal – which is to say a subject whose time is a restricted and restricting hollowed-out present free of the need for the challenge of imagining a futurity that exists beyond the self or the here and now.<sup>102</sup>

Therefore, it would be imprudent to view the clone as merely a “subject” liberated from an always already exclusionary heterosexual matrix. The clone invariably functions to replicate homogeneous racial dynamics as well, to privilege (and indefinitely repeat) certain cultural and ethnic lineages that can never be mixed. Is cloning merely an exercise in eugenics, a scientific quest for purity? Discursive interventions into the interplay between homosexuality and race often seem to founder when confronted with the dilemma of sexual sameness and racial difference simultaneously; in many cases sexual (and gender) sameness obscures (or even ignores entirely) racial or ethnic identifications obtained through the systematic highlighting of difference(s). As Philomena Essed and David Theo Goldberg suggest, moral diatribes against cloning find their urgency in the desire for difference and the fear that cloning would enable the endless replication of pernicious prejudices, churning out racially pure, young, able-bodied, heterosexual specimens.<sup>103</sup> Indeed without the *potential* for mixture, does race in particular become yet again a reified, insular phenomenon, ripe for assimilationist politics? Why are meditations on cloning so eager to explode the hegemony of sexual difference yet so reticent to confront the implied privileging of racial sameness? Whilst Edelman posits Baudrillard as an exponent of reproductive futurism, I perceive him as a potential ally in the rejuvenation and recentralisation of racial difference within the bonds of sexual sameness.

It is interesting to note that the destabilisation of temporality that Baudrillard, Edelman, and Muñoz affix to cloning and queerness echoes the dramatic shifts that were occurring in late twentieth century Cuba. In the preface to *Cuban Palimpsests* (2005), José Quiroga explores the Cuban preoccupation with memory, history, and the pervasive presence of a sticky temporality. Deploying the palimpsest as a dominant motif in Cuban culture, he writes: “The palimpsest does not reproduce the original, but it dismantles it, writes on top of it, allows it to be seen. It is a queer form of reproduction, one where two

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<sup>102</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2009), 94.

<sup>103</sup> Philomena Essed and David Theo Goldberg, ‘Cloning Cultures: The Social Injustices of Sameness,’ *Moral Issues in Global Perspective II: Human Diversity and Equality*, second edition, ed. Christine M. Koggel (Toronto: Broadview Press, 2006), 44.



texts, two sites, two lives blend into one continuous present.”<sup>104</sup> On first inspection, Quiroga’s assertions seem to me tediously limiting and somewhat contradictory. Placing queer in direct correlation to “the two,” continuously enshrined as the streamlined product of only two texts, two lives, two sites (I originally misread this as “two sires,” a rather apt slippage), squelches the non-normative potential of queerness under the heavy mantle of heteronormativity’s access to both the past and the future, dooming it to the stagnating limbo of a “continuous presence.” Surely the allure of queer replication is that it transcends the banality of coupling, the inevitability of the two. But this does not encompass the promise of Quiroga’s enterprise. For what he offers is a rather intriguing account of a Cuban nation which, by the early 1990s was stuck in a “special period” of uncertainty and fragmentation following the collapse of the Soviet Union, trapped between a “heroic” past and an unstable future, a nation obsessed with its own memorialisation.<sup>105</sup> For Quiroga, 90s Cuba signifies as a nation violently out of time with its own history, a nation whose grasp on the present had, since the advent of communism, always been circumvented by the lure and promise of an abstract utopian future.

The politicisation of memory is taken up by Gonzalez-Torres in his early, neglected performance pieces, conceived of whilst he was a student in Puerto Rico, pieces devised by one who was outside of Cuba but looking in with the eyes of a native.<sup>106</sup> For a 1982 performance entitled ‘Cuban Rust, Dreams on an Ice Bed,’ the artist drenched himself in suntan cream and reclined on a bed made of melting ice, entreating the audience to “come and enjoy, come and forget.”<sup>107</sup> Cuba is presented as a stereotypical island paradise, but one whose people are resting on ice which is quickly melting in the blaze of the fierce sun. Gonzalez-Torres resists nostalgia, seeking only to perform the contradictions inherent in the diverse representations of Cuba. This slippage is echoed in another early 80s performance installation, ‘The Beach is Nice,’ in which he played the role of tourist, sitting in the sun with a newspaper, *Artforum*, Hawaiian tropic suntan oil, and several Piña Coladas. Here he juxtaposes the ephemerality of performance with the tacky

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<sup>104</sup> José Quiroga, *Cuban Palimpsests* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2005), ix.

<sup>105</sup> This period was known as The Special Period in Time of Peace, a time marked by economic decline, extreme fuel shortages, and famine in Cuba. See Ariana Hernández-Reguant, *Cuba in the Special Period: Culture and Ideology in the 1990s* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). Interestingly Jesse Helms, the Senator implicated in the NEA controversy and the censorship of homoerotic art in this period also co-sponsored the Helms-Burton Act of 1996, a piece of legislation that strengthened the U.S. embargo on Cuba, an act which humanitarians argue adversely affected the general population of Cuba.

<sup>106</sup> Gonzalez-Torres’s early work as a performance artist has received no sustained critical attention until the 2006 show at El Museo del Barrio in East Harlem entitled *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Early Impressions* which touched upon his work before he achieved widespread fame.

<sup>107</sup> See Lynn Gamwell, *Dreams 1900-2000: Science, Art, and the Unconscious Mind* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 237.

memorialisation of memory (that traditional art forms often facilitates), noting that “the performance never happened, it was forgotten. In the island, memory is prohibited.”<sup>108</sup> As Gonzalez-Torres suggests, within Cuba (and a Westernised art economy) even memory is a device of political hegemony.

I would like to return to the analogy of the clone as a problematic symbol of sameness. The clone resonates in the spill and stack pieces of Gonzalez-Torres, for each stack, each spill, materialises through the bringing together of identical parts, endlessly reproduced copies that imitate the solidity of the monolithic whole. Baudrillard writes:

If all information is contained in each of its parts, the whole loses its significance. This means the end of the body also, the end of that unique object which we call the body, whose secret is precisely that it cannot be broken down into an accumulation of cells because it is an indivisible configuration.<sup>109</sup>

The paradox here seems to be that the clone seeks to (re)materialise the part *as the (illusory) whole*, the cellular code fostering the potential for the infinite reproduction of the body; any move away from procreative fecundity to self-actualisation appears neutralised by the simulated desire for wholeness. However, in Gonzalez-Torres’s spill and stack installations the identical particles come together to merely *mimic* the form of a sculpture, to *suggest* a homogeneous whole which is in fact an unstable amalgamation of autonomous parts. The parts remain significant in their own right; assimilation is imagined but not enacted. I wish to think about the configuring of solidity without solidarity as a deliberate refusal on the part of Gonzalez-Torres to champion the democratisation of difference. That he uses the reproduction of sameness to encapsulate the production of difference is wonderfully in line with his strategy of assimilation-as-resistance. By utilising identical, mass-produced objects Gonzalez-Torres is resisting the lure of multicultural pluralism, eliding the privileging of the majority through the autonomy of fluctuating parts, protecting racial and cultural specificity through the refusal to commodify difference. Here the menace of the melting pot has been deferred.

Gonzalez-Torres appropriates mechanisms of reproduction to comment on representations of cultural diversity, sexual sameness, and HIV/AIDS in this period. In 1991 (the year of Laycock’s death) he used twenty four billboards to disseminate the image of an unmade bed, marked by the presence of two departed bodies. The visible indentations of two heads in the soft, white bedding, the pronounced craters engraved in an otherwise

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<sup>108</sup> Felix Gonzalez-Torres, ‘This Beach is Nice,’ *Corpus Delecti: Performance Art of the Americas*, ed. Coco Fusco (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 58-59.

<sup>109</sup> Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil*, 133.

blank and ordinary visage, are transformed into queer relics, artefacts wrenched from the excavation of two interconnected lives that play out in the uneasy fissures that intersect (and invariably erode) the ostensibly bifurcated public and private spheres. By erecting multiple billboards of a bedroom (a space assumed to be – if any citizen so chooses – personal and concealed) in the midst of a crowded metropolis, Gonzalez-Torres is mocking this illusory separation, for now the division is nothing more than a screen and what is public is merely posturing as private.

This period of queer American history is marked by renewed anxiety over the rights to privacy. The 1986 *Bowers v. Hardwick* Supreme Court ruling – a seminal edict restricting the rights of gay citizens – eviscerated the cosy assumption that privacy was the inalienable right of every American. In 1982 Michael Hardwick was arrested in Atlanta for performing consensual oral sex with a male partner, an act prohibited under Georgia's state sodomy laws. Although charges were not brought against the defendant, Hardwick's decision to challenge the state's laws led to the Supreme Court ruling that maintained the validity of Georgia's sodomy statutes, upheld by a 5 to 4 majority. This ruling was finally invalidated in 2003 by *Lawrence v. Texas*. The *Bowers* case is often seen as a turning point in gay liberation, a catalyst for the anger-fuelled activism that would emerge in the late 1980s. Ironically the heteronormative compulsion to fetter queer desire (a strangely erotic frisson of disgust and curiosity) quintessentially validated the public arena as the *only* legitimate space for gay sexual expression, because the constitutionally mandated right to gather and demonstrate could not be easily sanctioned or repealed according to "sexual preference." Whilst the space of the bedroom was expressly contingent on the sexual proclivities of the gendered occupant(s) (a space now up for sale as the billboard format suggests), the streets emerged as dynamic sites for dissent.

The lover's bed is certainly multifaceted, reminiscent of the marital bed, a normalised place of sequestered desire and reproductive possibility, the very marker of inclusion in heterosexual privilege. I am struck by the irony, and the delicious perversion, of representing within the billboard expanse (a bastion of capitalism, engendered through *mechanical reproduction*) the dishevelled bed of two gay men, a bed that holds the promise of alternative ties of affect, that symbolises the absence of regimes of reproduction-as-procreation. However, it is this nod to a monumental symbol of heteronormative desire – and the attendant fantasies of kinship and futurity implicit in this – that creates the dissident drive and queer potential of this work. For what we as viewers/voyeurs, are seeing, what we have been given access to, are privy to, and are visually (sometimes voraciously) consuming is *not* the sanctioned realm of "straight"

bonding but pictorial remnants of gay intimacy, the spaces created by the material presence of Felix and Ross, two HIV-positive, queer, interracial bodies, weighty fractures in a landscape formally interpellated as heteronormative.

That the spectator should conflate the image of the bed with a sexual communion seems probable, possibly inescapable, and in this rationale dwells the dangerous paradoxes that may threaten those mindsets that either present the homosexual person with AIDS as a perverted and predatory threat or as a self-destructive entity in need of pity. As Crimp surmised early on, mainstream images of people with AIDS are not designed “to overcome our fear of disease and death [...] Nor are they meant only to reinforce the status of the PWA as victim and pariah [...] Rather, they are, precisely, *phobic* images, images of the terror of imagining the person with AIDS as still sexual.”<sup>110</sup> Gonzalez-Torres plays into these fears. He dismantles the viewer’s preconceptions, skilfully challenging the homophobic, oppressive gaze by forcing one to acknowledge that what may be the most disturbing (and compelling) facet of the image is not the visual residue of a gay man dying or dead from AIDS, but the material proof of *two HIV infected gay men sharing a bed*, still sexually virile, still forming loving networks, still able to transmit their (presumably sexually contracted) disease to others without the loneliness of the single occupant hospital gurney to mark them as pariahs, deemed not for public consumption. If, as Gonzalez-Torres vehemently attests, the hospital bed became the enduring icon of the first decades of the epidemic – “when people think about AIDS, they think of hospital beds” – he offers the viewer a myriad of thought-provoking alternatives: “That’s not AIDS.”<sup>111</sup>

Gonzalez-Torres hijacks mechanisms of capitalist reproduction, the billboard, to spread his subversive message, to divorce replication from procreation, and to force this instrument of state power to become a vector of viral dissemination, to reproduce in full view of the “general population” the very space often demonised as the site of HIV transmission, the “gay bedroom.” This tactic of assimilation, in which the artist reproduces an epitomic image of “legitimate” (read straight) sexuality, seductively inviting the spectator in, commanding identification by breeding familiarity with a commoditised spectacle, encapsulates Gonzalez-Torres’s viral agenda. He strategically infiltrates institutions of heteronormative power in order to promote subversion through mimicry.

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<sup>110</sup> Douglas Crimp, ‘Portraits of People with AIDS,’ *Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 130.

<sup>111</sup> Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 166.

To assimilate is to acquire. Acquire a country, a history, a collective memory, a home, a host, a bloodstream, a cell, a gene, a virus, a syndrome. To assimilate is to acquire, but not to be absorbed. When grappling with the disparate constructions of blood-mixing in late twentieth century America, assimilation becomes a concept of grave significance: a smooth transference, a benevolent penetration, a joyous union, a slippery negotiation, an anxiety-provoking dilution, a dangerous contamination, something to be encouraged, and something to be feared. But how does assimilation signify for those bodies forged in relation to a plethora of identity positions often marginalised and debased in mainstream discourse? How may we conceptualise assimilation in relation to the experiences of queer, HIV-positive immigrants, for example? For those populations straddling a multitude of exclusions, assimilation can no longer be a process invoked to name a simple negotiation or a singular interaction. Now assimilation must circumscribe the acquisition of a foreign culture, the repositioning within an established set of practices and beliefs, the subversion of racial and cultural exclusivity, the negotiation of heteronormativity, and the biological process of viral incorporation, the territorialising of matter perceived as external, as radically other, within the reified annals of the human DNA strand, the very blueprint of futurity. When seeking to position the queer, HIV-positive immigrant body within the boundaries of the U.S. nation-state, assimilation is often an act of defiance, a wilful negation, a stealthy subversion.

In 1991, as the post-revolutionary Cuban state was beginning to disintegrate, Felix Gonzalez-Torres was creating art in New York City which through its ephemerality, its malleability, its formal harmony and pleasing simplicity, its transience and transformability, its mechanisms of dispersal, circulation, and annihilation, stood as fallible monuments to his deceased lover Ross Laycock. Yet Gonzalez-Torres's artwork was never merely a *memento mori*, a personal tribute or a depoliticised example of memorialisation; indeed his installations were never merely artwork, but a performance and a negotiation, an outward manifestation of a deliberate agenda. The minimalist aesthetics he adopted, the quiet beauty, the symmetry, the muted colours, and the starkness, the inoffensive, harmless, even innocent materials (sickly-sweet sugar, blank swaths of paper, mundane clocks) all belied a straining desire and a cacophony of exclusions. From the containment of the Latino body to the constraints of Cuban communism to the anxiety around same-sex intimacy to the melancholia of AIDS, this art embodied a multitude of marginal identity formations whilst eschewing any facile identity politics, and achieved resistance through the *performance*, rather than the enactment, of assimilation. Gonzalez-Torres was inserting the histories, cultures, sexualities and bodies routinely negated, persecuted, and feared into

the very structures of power and privilege. His art of assimilation was not a deferential slide into the melting pot of multiculturalism but rather a stealthy infiltration, a subtle cleaving to the contours of traditional frameworks. Like the virus in his own body, Gonzalez-Torres sought misrecognition; he fervently desired to enter the infrastructures undergirding American hegemony undetected, to situate himself within the folds of the normative and normalising, to incorporate himself and become indistinguishable. He hijacked mainstream apparatuses and modes of production to (re)produce his agenda and to disseminate his ideology. For as he observed in 1993, “If you’re the spy – always ‘straight acting,’ always within the system,” he observed in 1993, then “you are the person that they fear the most because you’re one of them and you become impossible to define.”<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Rollins, ‘Interview with Felix Gonzalez-Torres,’ 21.

## Chapter Three

### Generating Degenerates

#### Viral Miscegenation in the Works of Gil Cuadros

Throughout my explorations into the unfolding relationship between narratives of blood-mixing at the end of the twentieth century, one statement has remained at the forefront of my mind. The moment in the groundbreaking *Borderlands* when Anzaldúa states:

at the confluence of two or more genetic streams, with chromosomes constantly “crossing over,” this mixture of races, rather than resulting in an inferior being, provides hybrid progeny, a mutable, more malleable species with a rich gene pool. From this racial, ideological, cultural and biological cross-pollinization, an “alien” consciousness is presently in the making.<sup>1</sup>

At the nexus where blood meets, fluids mingle to animate life, and even chromosomes are vulnerable to acts of transgression, a syndicate of mixed race beings which replot the potential of comingling is imagined. Here Anzaldúa, echoing the assertions made in Vasconcelos’s *la raza cósmica*, reverses eugenic rhetoric which posits racial mixing as degenerate; now the mestizo/a stands at the meeting point of disparate (albeit distinct) lineages, an embodied testament to cross-racial evolution. But to me, this celebratory assertion is fraught with uncomfortable complications and bulging with unspoken connotations. For what if the blending of blood signifies the point of HIV transmission as well as the reproduction of racially-mixed progeny? What if genetic confluence is enacted not through procreation but through the territorialising of viral matter in the body, resulting in a “contaminated” gene pool that acts to erode corporeality? What is “in the making” when unprotected sex conceptually transforms from an enabler of life to an arbiter of death?

As this thesis argues, race signifies ambivalently in the majority of Latino/a cultural production, because this demographic invariably identify across and between codified and coherent racial categories. This chapter excavates the moments when the rhetorical framing of blood-mixing shifts, moving from a process of racial determination which references

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<sup>1</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 99.

legacies of (interracial) heterosexual contact to reference another generative process, the construction of affective ties between gay men through the transmission of HIV. I argue that some gay Latinos (already circulating in economies of racial ambiguity) imagined the assimilation of HIV into their bloodstreams as a facilitator of racial transformation, a process I have termed “viral miscegenation.” Miscegenation is a highly charged term in American discourse but it is this, I contend, which lends it conceptual clout; for when the virus entering Latino bloodstreams comes from the bodies of white men, seroconversion often percolates in complex narratives of colonisation, exploitation, reparation, and transculturation. In Chapter One I analysed interracial viral transmission through the writing of Pedro Bustos Aguilar. In this chapter I contour my exploration in deference to the equally illuminating and under-appreciated work of Gil Cuadros, a writer who boldly confronts the difficulties and the pleasures of interracial gay sex and viral exchange.

Miscegenation has consistently been imagined as a product of heterosexual desire and as a device of generational kinship which privileges genealogical bonds through the (nevertheless burdened) materiality of racial, ethnic, and cultural extendibility. Historically, even attempts to disrupt the systematic, institutionalised privileging of racial purity adopted strategies that shored up regimes of compulsory heterosexuality, normalising interracial unions by demonising same-sex contact; by naturalising heterosexual desire in all its myriad manifestations, Peggy Pascoe argues, opponents of anti-miscegenation legislation “played a role in producing a modern culture that increasingly assigned its fears of unnaturalness to homosexuality rather than to race mixture.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the racist objections to miscegenation seem to lie in its promise to indiscriminately duplicate the racialised body; in a sense all miscegenation is viral as it is mired in the potentially unending (re)production of racialised, or indeed de-racialised, bodies. Although I am aware that miscegenation names a matrimonial contract between a man and a woman of different races, for the purpose of this chapter I am more interested in how miscegenation is theorised when it is deployed to name the (re)production of racial mixture through unprotected sexual intercourse.

Despite this negation, mixed race and homosexual identities have developed dialogically; it is significant that “homosexuality” and “miscegenation” (one term denoting the fear of sameness, the other naming the fear of difference) were both coined as linguistic signifiers at the same historical moment, the 1860s, for as Judith Raiskin attests, “people of color, particularly ‘mixed race’ people, and homosexuals were conflated through the ideas

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<sup>2</sup> Peggy Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 191.



of evolution and degeneration prevalent in the late nineteenth century.”<sup>3</sup> As Raiskin goes on to elaborate, “mulatto,” “half-caste,” and “hybrid” offspring became synonymous with diverse forms of transgression; indeed their very existence indexed the collapse of separation between races through prohibited sexual relations. Certainly narratives of progress and decline shadow cultural responses to the presence of HIV inside Latino/a bodies. Although portrayed as deficient in racist paradigms, Anzaldúa declares that in mixed race bodies “(r)evolution works out the clash of cultures.”<sup>4</sup> The framing of Latino/as as resilient, hybrid beings (and the impact of HIV/AIDS on this construction) forms the impetus for the following chapter. Similarly, HIV/AIDS has also imbibed narratives of evolution and degeneration, represented as excruciatingly debilitating *and* radically productive. After all, “viruses seem to perform as mix-masters of the evolutionary dance,”<sup>5</sup> Ed Cohen is keen to assert.

Although the contemporaneous emergence of homosexuality and miscegenation has been noted, little criticality has been levied to imagine or construct theories of miscegenation that *centralise* same-sex interracial desire as a prodigious tool of racial *becoming*, as opposed to the presumed ontological certainty of *being* raced.<sup>6</sup> Insofar as the mixing of blood demarcates racial hybridity as a radical site of transgression (especially in Chicana feminism and Latino/a studies), it invariably fails to denaturalise heterosexual unions as privileged vectors of racial authenticity. If, as Michel Foucault argues, “transgression has its entire space in the line it crosses,”<sup>7</sup> then the transgression imagined in the act of miscegenation finds its meaning in the prescribed limits of heterosexual procreation. Here the convergence of blood creates a site where one trajectory of identification, race and ethnicity, becomes defined by another intersecting strand, regimes of compulsory heterosexuality. Kathryn Bond Stockton, in a rare and vastly illuminating discussion of homosexual miscegenation, expands on this tension, observing:

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<sup>3</sup> Judith Raiskin, ‘Inverts and Hybrids: Lesbian Rewritings of Sexual and Racial Identities,’ *The Lesbian Postmodern*, ed. Laura Doan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 157.

Both “homosexuality” and “miscegenation” appeared for the first time in pamphlets released in the 1860s. Miscegenation was used for the first time in a 1863 pamphlet distributed in New York to undermine abolitionist efforts and destabilise the Lincoln administration whilst in 1869 Karl Maria Kertbeny published two pamphlets calling for an end to Prussia’s laws against same-sex intimacy, coining the term “homosexual” to explain this phenomenon.

<sup>4</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 103.

<sup>5</sup> Ed Cohen, ‘The Paradoxical Politics of Viral Containment; or, How Scale Undoes Us One and All,’ *Social Text*, 29: 1 (106), (Spring 2011), 15-35, 18.

<sup>6</sup> Siobhan B. Somerville unpacks the ways in which interracial and same-sex desire have been both conflated and divided in the U.S., yet tends to focus solely upon the 1967 landmark Supreme Court case *Loving v. Virginia*, which deemed laws prohibiting interracial marriage unconstitutional, and its impact on the overturning of repressive state sodomy laws in 2003. See Somerville’s ‘Queer Loving,’ *GLQ* 11:3 (2005) 335-370.

<sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault, ‘A Preface to Transgression’ [1963], *Bataille: A Critical Reader*, ed. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 27.

Presumably, men could not interbreed. After all, what would get “mixed” in such relations? The sexual exchange of bodily fluids that could have any lasting result – that could change what “the races” are – was imagined to be a straight affair. As for men who were sexually seeking men [...] what could ever be bred from this mix?<sup>8</sup>

Stockton proffers one answer to this dilemma, personifying miscegenation between men as a decomposing corpse of interracial attraction spawned in the mind, a festering desire which infects notions of sexual sameness through the mingling of dark and light, black and white. I argue that after the arrival of HIV/AIDS the questions that Stockton poses are lent ominous significance, as the lasting effects of sexual exchange between men have become painfully apparent.

With this in mind, I question Stockton’s tendency to posit homosexual miscegenation and heterosexual miscegenation as antithetical positions; she constructs the former as a cerebral interaction and the latter as a corporeal encounter. In the few accounts of homosexual miscegenation which have appeared in the past decade, none have moved beyond this rubric. In her 2009 monograph, *Queer in Black and White: Interraciality, Same-Sex Desire, and Contemporary African American Culture*, Stefanie K. Dunning coins the term “miscegephors” as a way to think through miscegenation as *metaphorical*, as something that stands in for an idea rather than names an act.<sup>9</sup> In both discussions any relationship which could exist between homosexuality and miscegenation is rendered prosaically theoretical. In this chapter I contend that through processes of viral transmission queer miscegenation comes to be understood as occurring in the body *as well as* in the imagination. To force HIV/AIDS discourse and miscegenation rhetoric to lie down together may appear troubling, to ally narratives of racial creation with those of corporeal destruction downright nonsensical. Indeed, to construct a lucid theory of the radical potential of viral miscegenation, it is not enough to merely ask what can result from the mingling semen of two (or more) gay men, one must also conceptualise the effects the virus enacts on the existing genealogical structures of its host, to make interventions into notions of kinship, legacy, and identity formation.

This chapter explores the ambivalent construction of viral miscegenation through the work of gay, Mexican-American writer Gil Cuadros. Although heavily involved in the artistic and activist scene of 1990s Los Angeles, and despite favourable reactions to his work, Cuadros has never achieved widespread attention, either as a Mexican-American

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<sup>8</sup> Stockton, *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame*, 152.

<sup>9</sup> Stefanie K. Dunning, *Queer in Black and White: Interraciality, Same-Sex Desire, and Contemporary African American Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 9.

cultural producer or as a gay man documenting the effects of AIDS at the end of the twentieth century.<sup>10</sup> A recipient of the 1991 Brody Literature Fellowship and a PEN/USA West grant for writers with AIDS, Cuadros's sole collection of short stories and poetry, *City of God*, appeared in 1994, published by City Lights Books. His participation in a writing workshop for people living with HIV/AIDS, conducted at the Lesbian and Gay Center in Los Angeles and run by community activist and writer Terry Wolverton, who would become a profound influence and close friend, facilitated his publication in several edited anthologies in the early 90s whilst links to VIVA widened his readership and strengthened his profile.<sup>11</sup> After much too brief a career, Cuadros died of AIDS-related complications in August 1996 at the age of thirty four.

It is my conjecture that Cuadros evokes moments of racial dissolution and materialisation, where heteronormative interracial (re)production – endowed with the potential to corrode stable categorisations of race and ethnicity – is displaced *and* reimagined through acts of same-sex intimacy and viral transmission. Racial identity signifies ambivalently in Cuadros's work. Cuadros is certainly attuned to a plethora of historical referents which saturate mestizo culture in the American Southwest at this time, surveying his native Los Angeles with eyes that, according to his close friend, the writer and performance artist Luis Alfaro, “only a gay Latino could see through.”<sup>12</sup> In an amusing and heartfelt obituary to the late author, Alfaro recounts that Cuadros proudly engaged with his cultural heritage, even adopting a heavily racialised Chicano homeboy aesthetic, “flirt[ing] with the cholo look,” he proclaims, “because [he] basically wanted to flirt with a cholo.”<sup>13</sup> Here Cuadros's cultural attachments signify from within a queer erotic paradigm.

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<sup>10</sup> There is little critical analysis of Cuadros's work. Those accounts that have appeared include Rafael Ocasio, ‘Autobiographical Writing and ‘Out of the Closet’ Literature by Gay Latino Writers,’ *Antipodas* 11/12 (1999/2000); Raúl Homero Villa, *Barrio-Logos: Space and Place in Urban Chicano Literature and Culture* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 2000); Pérez-Torres, *Mestizaje*; Paul Allatson, ‘My Bones Shine in the Dark’: AIDS and Chicano Queer De-scription in the Work of Gil Cuadros,’ *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, 32:1 (Spring, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> Cuadros talks about this workshop and Terry Wolverton's significant impact on his work in an interview with Kevin Martin for *Positive Living*, a magazine produced by APLA. See ‘Writer Gil Cuadros: Creating in the Face of AIDS,’ *Positive Living*, April 1994. Vol. 3 No. 4: 3. Print. Interview available at <https://representla.files.wordpress.com/2012/02/alvarez.pdf>. Accessed 14th February 2014.

<sup>12</sup> Luis Alfaro, ‘El Artista Brings AIDS Into His Work,’ *Frontiers en Español*, October 4<sup>th</sup> 1996, 31-32 and 83, 83.

Frederick Luis Aldama claims that Alfaro based his 2003 play ‘Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner’ on the life of Cuadros. However, this is not repeated in any reviews or criticism of the play. The play deals with two women's struggles with food, uncovering an unsatisfactory world of over indulgence, sublimation, and emotional starvation. Although a tenuous link, Cuadros did grapple with his weight throughout his lifetime; indeed he writes about enjoying his new slighter frame after developing AIDS. See Aldama, *The Routledge Concise History of Latino/a Literature* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 122.

<sup>13</sup> Luis Alfaro, ‘In the City of God: Remembering Gil Cuadros,’ *L.A. Weekly*, c. August 1996. This article is included in the Gil Cuadros Collection, 17, Chicano Studies Research Center, UCLA, University of California, Los Angeles.

However, Alfaro's claims find little validity in Cuadros's published works, which explicitly document his strained relations with his homophobic family and the wider Latino/a community. Indeed, Cuadros consistently finds refuge in white, gay culture, whilst white, masculine men are emphatically positioned as the primary objects of his sexual preference, the fodder for his erotic fantasies: "All my sex fantasies begin with my being owned by an older white man," he asserts.<sup>14</sup> This tense dialectic of racial belonging and interracial attraction forms the impetus for this chapter.

"Viral miscegenation" traces the discursive limits of sexuality, where rhetoric of heterosexual procreation as a natural, sanctioned, and necessary (albeit regularly stigmatised) facilitator of racial identity begins to splinter under the pressure of alternative, prohibited phenomena, in this case viral replication, racial mixing, and gay desire. I wish to situate Cuadros's work within the discursive spaces which form when biological evolution through blood-mixing collides with rhetoric of degeneracy through semen exchange. In the wake of HIV/AIDS, blood-mixing has been implicated in demonised narratives of parasitical queer contact, yet how is this reimagined in conjunction with mestizo identity, an often celebrated form of racial hybridity forged through the interpenetration of bloodlines? Viral miscegenation, I argue, is not merely deployed here to name the unrestricted reproduction of racially-mixed progeny; viral miscegenation references processes of racial deconstruction, where same-sex desire and viral contamination act to alter the trajectories of raced bodies. Such a re-inscription both cleaves to the formation of miscegenation as enabling – as set out by Chicana scholarship in the 1980s and 90s – and goes beyond rhetoric which constrains blood-mixing to a biological, essentialised feature of Chicano/a subjectivity, imagining consanguinity as a device of queer kinship formations. Moving from a discussion of the Latino family as an ambivalent space for the opening up of queer desire, to a conceptualisation of viral colonisation, to a meditation on the primacy of penetration and transformation in this period, this chapter theorises the

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Cholos are associated with men of predominantly Mexican-American descent, often used in conjunction with street gang and working class culture. Originally a derogatory term, cholo was reclaimed as a symbol of pride in the 1960s Chicano movement. Richard T. Rodríguez explores the growing cultural affectation of a hyper-masculine "homeboy" stance, a sensibility and style adopted by openly gay Chicano men in the barrios of Los Angeles, an aesthetic captured in the homoerotic drawings of L.A. visual artist Hector Silva. This performance of fetishistic desire and appropriation of visual cultural identity markers enacts, according to Rodríguez, a short-circuiting of heteronormative currents, reacting against tendencies to effeminise gay men and heterosexualise raced and ethnic displays of masculinity, to trap Chicano men into the polarised phobic positions of *machos* or *maricones*. See Rodríguez, 'Queering the Homeboy Aesthetic,' *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, 31: 2 (Fall 2006).

<sup>14</sup> Gil Cuadros, 'Heroes,' *His: Brilliant New Fiction by Gay Writers*, ed. Robert Drake and Terry Wolverton (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1995), 46.

moments when representations of blood-mixing work to conflate racial formation and viral transmission.

## **Umbilical Anuses**

Miscegenation has historically been read as a moment of societal transgression where borders demarcating kinship networks founded upon racial sameness and the ordered routing of blood begin to corrode and collapse. Blood-mixing is therefore central to any discussion of miscegenation, for as Jeffrey Bennett surmises, blood “repeatedly distinguishes between the in-group and the out-group, the stranger from the kin, the illicit from the pure [...] It delineates levels of citizenship, status, relationships, and identities.”<sup>15</sup> Yet after the start of the AIDS epidemic this becomes more complicated. Indeed in the wake of HIV/AIDS, Dean acknowledges, “the dawning realization that tricks one had forgotten might have marked permanently one’s insides engendered a sense that one’s bodily condition could be related to that of strangers [...] It was almost as if gay men were discovering in forgotten strangers long lost kin.”<sup>16</sup> Overnight, the irreversible transference of infected matter converted strangers into kin. Furthermore, as I discussed in the previous chapters, HIV blurs any facile distinction between kin and not-kin, for although it enters the body from an external realm it nevertheless remains in the body as part of the body, permanently assimilated into the DNA strand of its host. To return to Dennis Foster’s assertion, viruses signify as “flesh that is close, vital, and familiarly strange as only our mothers have been to us.”<sup>17</sup> This becomes even more significant when juxtaposed with representations of mestizo/a identity; for if, as Anzaldúa insists, “[mestizo/as] define who we are by what we include,”<sup>18</sup> how does this translate when the thing included is a virus?

The re-routing of kinship lines is a key concern pervading (anti)miscegenation discourse. Therefore, I wish to explore the ways in which bonds to the maternal body and paternalistic culture are reimagined and reappropriated in Cuadros’s writing as a way of forging affiliations with his white lovers. Utilising the recurring image of the umbilical cord scar, presented as both a corporeal referent of fleshy ties to the mother and a fetishistic hole aligned with anal eroticism, this section traces the ambivalent constructions of familial affinity, simultaneously scripted as maintaining diseased heteronormative

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<sup>15</sup> Bennett, *Banning Queer Blood*, 28-29.

<sup>16</sup> Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, 91.

<sup>17</sup> Foster, ‘Fatal West,’ 24.

<sup>18</sup> Anzaldúa, ‘(Un)natural bridges, (Un)safe spaces,’ 3.

connections *and* enabling affective alliances through unprotected cross-racial gay sex. The umbilical cord is a powerful symbol in Cuadros's work. It is saturated with iconography of blood-mixing and procreative extendibility, embedded in a continuous cycle of blood exchange and purification between mother and progeny and, once severed, it provides a permanent mark of familial separation, a hole which encodes the child's very otherness. I ask how the umbilical cord can be resituated when blood is imagined simultaneously as a quasi-metaphorical substance of heredity *and* queer eroticism, a substance that, in both forms, facilitates diseased and dis-eased bonding. Catherine Waldby and Robert Mitchell state:

Over the last fifteen years or so, blood derived from the umbilical cord has been transformed from a waste product, at the disposal of the hospital, to a clinically valuable substance, useful for the treatment of serious blood disorders. In this process of revaluation, the ontological status of umbilical cord blood has changed as well. While it was once considered an abject tissue, designating neither mother nor child, it is now deemed a significant fragment of the infant.<sup>19</sup>

But how does umbilical cord blood signify when it not only references the privileged symbiosis of mother and child, but also functions to create affective bonds (presenting as sanguineous skeins) between gay, HIV-positive men?

Furthermore, I contend that the anus becomes metaphorically aligned with the umbilical cord in Cuadros's work, not merely as a site of expulsion (the catharsis of bodily waste) or as a fragile cavity forming a pathway between infected semen and the inner recesses of the body, but as a site of recalibrated kinship between gay lovers and a loaded spatial construct that encodes queer male sociality. In this equation the umbilicus and the anus become resonant of blood and waste, life and decay. In this space of transformation the boundaries separating genetics and erotics begin to break down, as blood (sharing) becomes replaced by semen (exchange), essential fluids that begin to lose their exclusivity throughout Cuadros's narratives. Although blood and semen reside in different parts of the body and rarely mix they are continuously conceived of as analogous; both are linked to imagery of production and danger, both are heavily stigmatised and liable to segregation in this period.

Queer appropriation of filiation breaks down the primacy of ordered, enclosed patterns of descent between biologically familial generations (indicative of vertical, linear representations of blood flow) to reveal the inevitability of blood to signify beyond the

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<sup>19</sup> Catherine Waldby and Robert Mitchell, *Tissue Economies: Blood, Organs, and Cell Lines in Late Capitalism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), 110.

limits of the body and the family unit, to index the corrosion of interior and exterior exclusivity that acts of bleeding engender. Building upon Keating's discussion of an Anzaldúan ontology of "radical interconnectedness" – in which bodies replicate themselves mimetically in other bodies – Mikko Tuhkanen advances a theory of "hemo-philial ethics," a term devised to name the attraction of blood to blood.<sup>20</sup> Emancipating bodily replication from the acceptable realms of bounded kinship or community structures alone (formed by the presumed sharing of blood, which also translate as racial homogeneity) Tuhkanen explores the precocious capacity of blood to extend beyond its prescribed boundaries, to move between cultures, and to enact processes of cultural and biological interpenetration. Tuhkanen argues that hemo-philial ethics constitute "a composite entity's potentially dangerous relation to the world, the tendency of bordered but 'philial' bodies to bleed together."<sup>21</sup> Intriguingly, if etymologically "hemo" is blood and "philial" is love, and if Haemophilia (the contraction of these terms) is an *inherited*, life-threatening disorder that impedes the body's ability to control coagulation, the process that restricts the excessive flow of blood, the implication is that love has a negative impact on blood. Certainly when discussing HIV, sexual intimacy is seen as the most recognisable facilitator of infected blood. What is more, Tuhkanen's analysis illuminates the heightened propensity of *homosexuality* to aid the dissemination of blood, for as Anzaldúa consistently asserts, and I have reasserted in my discussion of viral mestizaje, queers perform momentous acts of cross-cultural and cross-racial exchange at the end of the twentieth century.

But what if HIV transmission becomes enacted by the displacing of blood, and implicated in the transportation of blood across borders and between cultures? What if the "bleeding" of "philial" bodies is shadowed by the threat of infection? As Dean notes, since the protease moment, sexual exchange has been redeployed to forge consanguinity between men; in this example, blood's attraction to blood now names a vector of viral affiliation mediated through fantasies of generation and kinship, or even biosociality, to appropriate Paul Rabinow's term.<sup>22</sup> Like mestizaje, "HIV has become a resource for queer reinventions of kinship," Dean proffers, "because it offers a vital means of showing relatedness."<sup>23</sup> In a barebacking paradigm vertical and horizontal modes of relatedness become complicated by the fantasy production surrounding HIV/AIDS; through the

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<sup>20</sup> Mikko Tuhkanen, 'Mestiza Metaphysics,' *Queer Times, Queer Becomings*, 273.

<sup>21</sup> Tuhkanen, 'Mestiza Metaphysics,' 261.

<sup>22</sup> See Paul Rabinow, 'Artificiality and Enlightenment: From Sociobiology to Biosociality,' *Incorporations*, ed. Jonathan Crary and Sanford Kwinter (New York: Zone, 1992).

<sup>23</sup> Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, 89.

sharing of the virus (a substance that affects the body as permanently as genetic inheritance) lovers become transformed into brothers, fathers, and sons: “Breeding the virus in other men’s bodies creates simultaneously lateral and vertical kin relations: the man whom one infects with HIV becomes his sibling in the ‘bug brotherhood’ at the same time that one becomes his parent or ‘Daddy,’ having fathered his virus.”<sup>24</sup> Viral kinship is certainly explored in early cultural responses to the epidemic; as activist and essayist Gregg Bordowitz acknowledges, “when I tested HIV antibody positive in the spring of 1988, at twenty-four years old, I no longer felt part of my generation. My fantasy reveals that, unconsciously, I think that *AIDS is the legacy I have inherited* from the previous generation of gay men.”<sup>25</sup> Playing on this dialectic, my discussion of umbilical anuses tracks the ways that gay male desire cleaves to and reimagines the significance of familial (and filial) bonds and racial alliances, without privileging the family as the only legitimate space of intimacy and belonging.

It is important to note that family is not a simplistic signifier in late twentieth century Chicana feminist discourse. Indeed, for Cherríe Moraga, *la familia* is inherently an expanded concept, facilitated by:

cross-generational bonding, deep emotional ties between opposite sexes, and within our sex. It is sexuality that involves, but is not limited to, intercourse or orgasm. It springs forth from touch, constant and daily [...] It is finding familia among friends where blood ties are formed through suffering and celebration shared.<sup>26</sup>

Here *familia* is formed from substances shared, from the mingling of bodily fluids, and the pleasure of sexual connection. In her 1989 play *Giving Up the Ghost* Moraga extends the perimeters of queer kinship, describing lesbian attachment as a mechanism for “making familia from scratch.”<sup>27</sup> Moraga rescripts familial structures that maintain repressive power relations, providing a model of kinship that encapsulates the queer and the *raza* (the race), the mystical amalgamation of the two forming a non-heteronormative *mestizaje*. Moraga’s vision of recalibrated *familia* becomes further complicated by the insertion of HIV/AIDS discourse; with the advent of HIV/AIDS blood ties forged through substances shared were lent new significance, suffering deployed as a rhetorical and political device to construct

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<sup>24</sup> Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, 86.

<sup>25</sup> Gregg Bordowitz, *The AIDS Crisis is Ridiculous and Other Writings* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004), 48: emphasis added.

<sup>26</sup> Cherríe Moraga, *Loving in the War Years: Lo Que Nunca Pasó por Sus Labios* [1983], second edition (Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press, 2000), 102-103

<sup>27</sup> Cherríe Moraga, ‘Giving Up the Ghost’ [1989], *Heroes and Saints & Other Plays* (Albuquerque: West End Press, 1994), 35.



indissoluble strands of community and affect, and celebration adopted to carve out new queer genealogies fuelled by pride.<sup>28</sup> Significantly, Moraga does not repudiate kinship based around “blood ties”; rather she imagines these sanguineous skeins materialising from “suffering and celebration *shared*.” In this way she is, like the barebackers discussed in *Unlimited Intimacy*, uncovering “the various ways that people [can] become related to each other *by blood* without involving heterosexuality.”<sup>29</sup> Kinship becomes, in other words, for both Moraga and Dean, forged through the sharing of “substance,” be it suffering, celebration, or a virus.

Cuadros’s ambivalent rendering of *familia* is vividly captured in the short story ‘My Aztlan: White Place’ published in *City of God*. Here the gay Latino protagonist – the author’s own narrator-self, repeatedly surfacing as a thinly veiled version of Cuadros<sup>30</sup> – embarks on a drive through Los Angeles. Intoxicated and battling deteriorating eyesight and nausea (products of his AIDS-related conditions) he is forced, through deep introspection, to confront the bigotry of his dysfunctional family, the fetishism and racial negation of his white gay milieu – “those West Hollywood bar types”<sup>31</sup> he met at Rage, Revolver, and Motherlode, legendary gay bars on the Westside – and the colonisation of the mythical Chicano (home)land Aztlan, his illusory home, the site of his ambivalent (be)longing. Through these disparate musings HIV disseminates. The virus is constantly metamorphosed throughout the course of the narrative, symbolically shifting from a weapon used to punish his homophobic family, to a tool strategically deployed to subvert heteronormative imperatives rooted in the very materiality of his raced body.

From the onset of the narrative Cuadros generates a sense of intense familial deprivation, positioning the protagonist between an emotionally stunted and physically cruel mother – “Mom, why did you burn my hands with the iron and say it was an

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<sup>28</sup> Rhetoric which posits the family as a repressive infrastructure, impeding the proliferation of queer desire, is re-articulated by some Latino scholars in this period. In *Next of Kin: The Family in Chicano/a Cultural Politics* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009), Richard T. Rodríguez claims that family constructions cannot be dismissed as oppressive or antithetical to the fostering of queer identities and economies of desire. Invoking notions of “la familia” as a central, organising structure in Chicano/a liberationist movements in the 60s and 70s, Rodríguez explores an alternative genealogy of kinship relations amongst Chicano/a communities that addresses the heteropatriarchal and nationalist agendas endemic to biological family whilst tracing attempts to forge queer familia sensitive to rubric of biological, heterosexually constituted bloodlines. Rodríguez’s research also excavates the rich terrain of Lowrider, Rap, and Hip-Hop culture as emissions that reveal the multiple ways familia is deployed in Chicano cultural production, where bonds of race are imagined as ties of brotherhood, and national empowerment is conflated with re-imagined kinship.

<sup>29</sup> Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, 90: emphasis added.

<sup>30</sup> Introducing ‘Heroes’ Cuadros writes: “As much as I try to disguise it, most of my work is autobiographical.” See *His: Brilliant New Fiction by Gay Writers*, 235. Although Cuadros does evoke other characters in his work I am most interested in those who simulate his experiences as a gay, HIV-positive, Mexican-American man living in Los Angeles.

<sup>31</sup> Gil Cuadros, ‘My Aztlan: White Place,’ *City of God* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1994), 55.

accident? tattoo my arms with the car's lighter? make me wish your wish, that I was never born?"<sup>32</sup> – and a drunken, overly demonstrative father who, in a markedly sexualised way, would perforate his body's envelope: "He would kiss my scalp, call me *mijo*. His brown mechanic's hand would slip under my shirt, rub my stomach. He'd press his finger in the hole, my umbilical cord's scar til I screamed, writhing and laughing."<sup>33</sup> The hole formed by the sutured umbilicus is transformed into a symbol of maternal separation and cultural alienation *and* a space that facilitates and scripts the emergence of same-sex desire – "my lover never understood why I hated to be tickled, why I liked to be tied up"<sup>34</sup> – marking the site where these two threads merge. The probing fingers of his brown labourer father both violate his bodily boundaries and dictate his erotic investment in fantasies of generation and penetration, his white lovers consistently posited as father-like tops. Later in the narrative he states: "[my lover's friends] all treated me as a son, this little Mexican boy."<sup>35</sup> In a poem entitled 'Conquering Immortality' he declares: "I was jacking off regularly / to fantasies of getting screwed by men, / straight men / their wives in bed with us / [...] I would sleep in the curves of his arm / [...] a son wrapped in his father's protection."<sup>36</sup>

In both accounts the narrator-self layers his sexual encounters with images of unequal, paternal relations; in the former his race and youth ensures his subservience in the stratified sexual economy of his lover's white crowd, whilst in the latter his positioning within a warped heterosexual union places him simultaneously as oblique spouse and incestuous progeny, perverting the bonds of matrimony whilst maintaining fantasies of paternal protection. Through the dual functionality of the probed umbilical cord scar, Cuadros reveals how his body is mediated by the penetrating presence of both his biological family and his white lovers. In a discussion of Cuadros's work Rafael Pérez-Torres writes: "The family stands as a place of origin where images of a normative heterosexuality and family bonding get undone."<sup>37</sup> I would subvert this slightly, claiming the family as a place of origins where normative sexuality and bonding get rescripted and reappropriated, spun outwards to signify within the structuring of the narrator's queer desire.

'My Aztlán' signifies a failed utopia, a construction that strains under the weight of the narrator's multifaceted identity. The story opens with a scene of familial harmony:

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<sup>32</sup> Cuadros, 'My Aztlán,' 55.

<sup>33</sup> Cuadros, 'My Aztlán,' 55.

<sup>34</sup> Cuadros, 'My Aztlán,' 56.

<sup>35</sup> Cuadros, 'My Aztlán,' 58.

<sup>36</sup> Gil Cuadros, 'Conquering Immortality,' *City of God*, 139.

<sup>37</sup> Pérez-Torres, *Mestizaje*, 166.

Driving the San Bernadino is the closest I get to Mecca. I was born below this freeway, in a house with a picket fence now plowed under. It was the same street my uncle and tia lived on. I shut off the radio, quietly pass the church, a pharmacy, a corner gas station where Dad pumped tanks full of ethyl while I collected two of every animal for an ark, my free gift.<sup>38</sup>

Yet this remembrance is littered with uncomfortable juxtapositions: the modern metropolis rubs up against a sacrosanct space of spiritual devotion, the anglicized uncle cohabits with the Latina *tia*, the church stands alongside the pharmacy, one a reminder of the narrator's past religious obligations, the other a testament to his present medical negotiations. Whilst his father performs his masculinised chores, the son accepts his inevitable gift – a toy ark that holds only the promise of survival (and redemption) through heteronormative coupling and reproduction.

However, just as the picket fence yields to the advances of the industrialised city (the new American dream) so the protagonist hints at the corrosion of the familial script that disavows the dissident other: "I imagine the house still intact, buried under dirt and asphalt, dust and neglect. Hidden under a modern city, this is my Aztlan, a glimpse at my ancient home, my family. All it takes is a well-chosen phrase to cave in."<sup>39</sup> The image of the normative family remains yet is obscured by the realities of evisceration, sacrificed to the corrupting interpenetration of transcultural urbanities. Similarly, at the conclusion of 'My Aztlan,' the protagonist celebrates the erotic intimacies of his gay crowd, luxuriating in being "buried under their bodies' weight, dirt and asphalt, moist skin, muscle and blood."<sup>40</sup> His experiences as a gay man in a predominantly white, urban subculture and as a son, enmeshed in a preordained set of the cultural legacies and traditions, inexplicitly converge here as the land of his ancestors becomes aligned with the sinuous, tactile bodies of his lovers. But this passage also acknowledges the destructive impact his sexuality has on his other racial and cultural affiliations. He positions himself as Aztlan, buried under the weight of his desire as his idealised home is crushed beneath the progression of the modern city; the imagery of burial under the "skin, muscle and blood" of gay (white) men presages his AIDS diagnosis and corporeal decline. Here the prophecy encoded in the story's title is realised; Aztlan, an emblem of Chicano/a heritage, is melded with whiteness, a symbol of

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<sup>38</sup> Cuadros, 'My Aztlan,' 54.

<sup>39</sup> Cuadros, 'My Aztlan,' 55.

<sup>40</sup> Cuadros, 'My Aztlan,' 58.

queer desire, yet separated by the colon, a symmetrical reflection which encompasses the narrator's ambivalent identifications and his contingent belonging in a colonised land.<sup>41</sup>

In what ways may the interventions of queer(ed) forms of kinship displace the umbilical cord as a tendon of genealogical filiation, recasting it as a rhizomatic stem tethering bodies through horizontal lines of relatedness? And how are these connections forged through viral transmission *and* the mixing of races? In *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980) Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari propose a system of interaction that disrupts evolutionary rhetoric based around the proliferation of biological characteristics, asking how propagation may be conceived of without filiation, how multiplicity may be imagined without the unity of the ancestor as a grounding principle. For Deleuze and Guattari, peopling and becoming rely not on vertical lines of inheritance but on unstable structures of expansion, propagation, occupation, and contagion: "Transversal communications between different lines scramble the genealogical trees [...] The rhizome is an antigenealogy."<sup>42</sup> They continue: "becoming is not an evolution, at least not an evolution by descent and filiation [...] Becoming is always of a different order than filiation. It concerns alliance."<sup>43</sup> Within this model, propagation by contagion is dislocated from the ideological workings of filiation-as-heredity. However, Deleuze and Guattari do acknowledge that these strands often "intermingle and require each other."<sup>44</sup> Indeed the image of the *scrambled* genealogical tree suggests a disruption of familial scripts rather than an abject disavowal. Identity is thus imagined as a form of hybridity, forged through substances shared between bodies rather than through biological economies of inheritance and reparation. Deleuze and Guattari's observations offer new ways to think about the transmission and distribution of race and culture, where *becoming* raced and *acquiring* culture develops through systems of infection rather than through the replication of biological traits and membership in an imagined community.

However, I diverge slightly from Deleuze and Guattari's reading of hybridity, partly because they set up very distinct and rigid adversarial modes of alliance which falter when juxtaposed with Dean's rendering of viral kinship. "We oppose epidemic to filiation,

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<sup>41</sup> Cuadros appropriates historical accounts that align Aztlan with whiteness. Michael Pina describes Aztlan as a "paradisiacal place where the Aztecs lived in comfort and ease. Aztlán is referred to as the place of "Whiteness" or herons, which indicates a lush setting teaming with flora and fauna." See Pina, 'The Archaic, Historical and Mythicized Dimensions of Aztlán,' *Aztlán: Essays on the Chicano Homeland*, ed. Rudolfo A. Anaya and Francisco A. Lomelí (Albuquerque: El Norte Publications, 1989), 23. For Cuadros, Aztlan encompasses a fraught negotiation of his attraction to white men, filtered through the lens of his cultural upbringing.

<sup>42</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* [1980], trans. Brian Massumi (London: Continuum, 2004), 12.

<sup>43</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 263.

<sup>44</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 266.

contagion to heredity, peopling by contagion to sexual reproduction, sexual production,” they assert.<sup>45</sup> For Dean, and indeed for Cuadros, no facile division can be drawn between epidemic and filiation, contagion and heredity; (homo)sex remains, for both, a productive act for forming kinship structures. In bareback subcultures, affective ties stimulated by unprotected anal intercourse often mimic normative familial relations. Likewise, as I discussed in Chapter One, Latino/a subjects who position themselves in relation to “brown” affective economies often do so in order to highlight, query, and appropriate the confluence of Latino/a identity and contamination.

Furthermore, the discourse generated by Deleuze and Guattari and by Dean consistently fails to factor in race, ethnicity, and historical economies of exploitation into a coherent theory of bodily relatedness. Indeed, structures of horizontal relatedness not only indicate modes of queer sociality and viral affiliation (Dean) and the scrambling of genealogical trees (Deleuze and Guattari), they also encode patterns of unequal race relations in the West. In the influential ‘Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe’ (1987) Hortense J. Spillers deconstructs kinship, a structure that fails to account for the violent displacement of family in the African diaspora which congealed in North America under slavery. Kinship in this period began to irrevocably lose its coherency, posited as a flawed fabric of relations that could be rendered at any given moment by acts of politics and law. Economies of inheritance and legacy invested in the unrestricted flow of vertical bloodlines that had defined notions of family in the West began to unravel; kinship became positioned as a vector of white privilege in free communities, whilst new vistas of relationality which placed weight on alternative ties of affect now began to emerge. Enslaved people were forced into “the *horizontal relatedness* of language groups, discourse formations, bloodlines, names and properties by the legal arrangements of enslavement.”<sup>46</sup> Although kinship is often presented as “natural,” it implicitly relies upon the privileging of certain modes of relatedness which must be cultivated, and maintained, under specific conditions; belonging is perpetually circumvented by legal precedents of ownership, which become perverted when flesh is bartered in an economy of exchange. Relationality is thus always a mechanism of racialised politics, undergirded by sanctioned modes of heterosexual reproduction, a distinction which many queer theorists fail to engage with. Spillers dispenses with rhetoric positing race as an innate feature of biological inheritance; rather, she conceptualises race and kinship as cultural, historically situated

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<sup>45</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 266.

<sup>46</sup> Hortense J. Spillers, ‘Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,’ *Diacritics*, Vol. 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987), 75: emphasis added.

transmissions. Although radically imagining new vistas of queer affect, which actually signify through the transformation of bodily integrity, Dean's conceptualisation of kinship in *Unlimited Intimacy* continues to rely on privileged notions of regulated familial structures; indeed his assertion that relational ties may form new filial networks has already been taken up by critical race theorists, like Spillers, a debt he does not acknowledge.

Therefore, populations whose histories unfold within the skewed legacies of enslavement and colonialism often transcend kinship models based around the vertical reproduction of bodies, as I shall explore further in the next section. For Tuhkanen ontological mestizaje (as a horizontal, nonfiliative mode of expansion) cannot be contained within a framework of regulated sexual exchange or normative kinship dynamics but must adhere to notions of interpenetration, forming hybrid interspaces where the coherency of stable bodily boundaries begins to dissolve.<sup>47</sup> Such interconnectedness is a feature of Latino/a hybridity for Anzaldúa; the mestizo/a, after all, "has the ability, the flexibility, the malleability, the amorphous quality of being able to stretch, and go this way and that way."<sup>48</sup> Echoing Deleuze and Guattari, mestizo/as cannot be comfortably conceived of as a reproduced/reproducing entity, compliant with neat structures of sanctioned descent, but must signify through complex proliferations, through webs of contaminated relations. Anzaldúa's conceptualisation offers a dynamic way to read filiation as a fluctuating phenomenon that signifies from within narratives of cultural and ethnic legacy whilst transcending the boundaries of heteronormative inheritance. Constructing a theory of viral mestizaje further complicate the call to mestizo/a hybridity; if mestizaje traces the interpenetration of disparate lineages through de-legitimised forms of sexual contact, HIV transmission replicates this process.

Throughout Cuadros's narratives bonding through contagion is a strong referent, yet cannot be severed from notions of kinship. In his later writing, the umbilical cord becomes rejuvenated, not as a necessary connection to the maternal body but as a fleshy tube of affinity forged through queer desire, a connection that corporeally encodes the interpenetration of (interracial) bodies. The short story 'Heroes' (1995) reintroduces a version of Cuadros's narrator-self who, during the course of a shower, is forced to confront a disquieting reality in the wake of his declining health. His body is materialised as a new, alien landscape, disfigured by the Hickman's catheter scar adorning his chest, contoured by

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<sup>47</sup> Mikko Tuhkanen, 'Queer Hybridity,' *Deleuze and Queer Theory*, ed. Chrysanthi Nigianni and Merl Storr (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 101.

<sup>48</sup> Anzaldúa, 'Lesbian Wit,' 133.

new steroid-fuelled muscles and stained “slightly orange from a MAC prophylactic”<sup>49</sup> he must take in order to negotiate his illness. Within this story sexual connections become concrete ties, materialising as a means of erotic alliance between seropositive men, bonds linking the living and the dead in a sensual network of relatedness:

My first lover died just after he had [a Hickman’s catheter] installed [...] I am the first person I know who survived one and had it removed. I imagine an invisible tube sewn onto my chest, the other end attached to John; and I am too afraid to pull away and tear our skin, and all I can think is he is dead.<sup>50</sup>

Here the catheter produces a medicalised orifice, a space that holds (and conserves) memories of a deceased lover. The indelible mark made by the medical instrument brands both men like a tattoo; like a tattoo, which Dean argues “constitutes a stay against mutability”<sup>51</sup> and “preserve[s] a love object against the depredations of time,”<sup>52</sup> the scar also becomes a visible means of denoting their membership in a group, their acquisition of a mutual identity. “I’m still afraid that the skin where the Hickman’s catheter had been might break open like a sacred heart,”<sup>53</sup> Cuadros writes. Not only does the positioning of the scar over his heart reference his love for John, the evocation of the sacred heart, a Catholic icon particularly prevalent in Mexican culture, invites complex interpretations. Imagining himself endowed with a “sacred heart” – portrayed in Christian art as the flaming, radiating heart of Christ, encircled by a crown of thorns, wounded, dripping blood – positions the narrator-self as a Christ-like figure, mired in the suffering of the unfurling AIDS epidemic. Concurrently, and more intriguingly, the image of the sacred heart memorialised in Catholicism is derived from Mexico; as Armando Favazza recounts, “The heart of the Aztec god, for example, was often portrayed through a wound in his chest. From this heart a dynamic ‘fluid’ streamed out.”<sup>54</sup> This iconography is redolent in Cuadros’s story; but now the fluid threatening to leak from the compromised body is both blood infected with HIV, and a more ambiguous substance, a stream of affection

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<sup>49</sup> Cuadros, ‘Heroes,’ 48.

<sup>50</sup> Cuadros, ‘Heroes,’ 47. “John,” who appears in several of Cuadros’s stories, refers to the author’s first partner John Edward Milosch. John’s death from AIDS in 1987 fuelled Cuadros’s writing. Cuadros writes about John in ‘The Emigrants’ *Frontiers*, 19<sup>th</sup> June 1992.

<sup>51</sup> Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, 172.

<sup>52</sup> Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, 173.

<sup>53</sup> Cuadros, ‘Heroes,’ 47.

<sup>54</sup> Armando R. Favazza, *Bodies Under Siege: Self-Mutilation, Nonsuicidal Self-Injury, and Body Modification in Culture and Psychiatry* [1987], third edition (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 13.

(cemented by the exchange of semen, that most “dynamic fluid”), flowing from the body of the narrator to touch his dead lover.

The catheter scar (like the umbilical scar) permanently engraves histories of relatedness onto the body; it becomes, simultaneously and imperceptibly, a brash insignia exposing the presence of an incurable disease, and a corporeal socket, a device to which a cord of affect – “an invisible tube” – may be attached, *ensuring contact* between two bodies. The conduit tethering the separated lovers is saturated with shifting layers of imagery: simultaneously interpreted as a monument to queer desire, an alternative affine forged via the dissolution of the compromised body, *and* a prosthetic, dysfunctional umbilical cord (carrying the spectre of shared, infected blood), capable of neither offering nourishment nor cleansing the blood. The engendering of life, as an imagined creative impetus sequestered in the maternal body, is perverted by the insidious interruption of AIDS; nevertheless the virus becomes the very means of bonding, imagined as a fibrous strands of affect which shall endure beyond death. Furthermore, Cuadros casts the narrator in the role of concerned parent, afraid to detach from his ailing charge. This anxiety is repeated in ‘Letting Go,’ a short story published in *City of God* in which the narrator-self refuses to relinquish “a thick sea-worthy rope woven from twine”<sup>55</sup> which unites his body with that of his past lover, for he intuits that once this tie is broken his love object shall be lost and his own hold on life will begin to unravel.

In both stories the protagonist’s dislocation from his biological family is regenerated as affective bonds between gay men; he stands on a continuum acknowledging his imperishable connection to past lovers and imagining his future tied to the life of his present partner. For the narrator-self, ties of same-sex desire and the sharing of viral loads represent an authentic and accessible legacy for queer subjects, couched in heteronormative language of reproduction: “It comforts me to think [my lover] will survive after I’ve gone, he is the part of me who will continue.”<sup>56</sup> This statement may appear to be sentimental rhetoric yet holds seeds of a potentially radical deconstruction of kinship structures which imagine heterosexual breeding as the only mechanism for extending and reproducing the body, for ensuring immortality through legacies of sexual contact. Through the taking and giving of viral issue, always disseminated from another, Cuadros and his partner are constructing new ties of kinship forged through affective engagement and the literal absorption of the lover’s issue within the self. Whilst other kinship models function through the disavowal and colonisation of otherness, viral kinship opens up the

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<sup>55</sup> Gil Cuadros, ‘Letting Go,’ *City of God*, 91.

<sup>56</sup> Cuadros, ‘Heroes,’ 49.



body to the other; here the viral interloper worries the line that separates self from not-self, kin from not-kin. The gay male body is articulated as that which can expand, extend, and ultimately survive when vertical lines of kinship become displaced by horizontal bonding, when blood-mixing shifts from a biologically determined cohesion of bodies to a (homo)sexually overdetermined corrosion of heteronormative consanguineous affinity.

'Heroes' ends, as it begins, with water. Cuadros fantasises that he is back in Pasadena, in the house he shared with his deceased partner, John. He is in the bathtub, John rematerialised at his side. He gags as the stench of shit, "the kind of shit John had while he'd been sick in the hospital,"<sup>57</sup> momentarily overpowers him; but he is placated when he looks upon his rejuvenated lover: "John looks as he did, young again, his cheeks full and ruddy, his blond hair neatly combed to the side."<sup>58</sup> This brief calm is shattered when he is confronted with a scattering of KS lesions on his body:

I begin to cry as I notice the sponge moving over small marks raised on my skin. The odd shaped badges are dark as bruises and covered with thread-like red veins. I try to pick on one, to dig out the imperfection with my nail. John holds my hand steady, doesn't let me finish what I've started. A trickle of blood oozes from under the scar. As it hits the water, the color widens like melted wax dripping into a warm pool. The blood floats like thin petals of lotus flowers on the surface, constantly moving and in flux. The blooms land on my legs and mark them permanently. John says, "Try not to cry." And I fail.<sup>59</sup>

In Chapter One I "brownd" representations of KS lesions, suggesting that they conspicuously index the corporeal consequences of sexual transgression, indicating the collapse of socially imposed and morally policed boundaries. In this rendering KS lesions signify the precarious capacity of blood to extend beyond the body, to break free of the fragile blood vessel membrane (the literal bloodlines), to disseminate dangerously. Indeed Cuadros suggests that HIV works to thin the blood, to exacerbate blood's ability to flow: "my blood [is] thin and unable to clot."<sup>60</sup> However, Cuadros also imagines the corrosion of his blood vessels as an alternative way to extend his blood, to reconnect with his partner. The lesions (like the catheter scar) become simultaneously cherished insignias – presenting KS lesions as a "red badge of courage," harking back to Stephen Crane's story of

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<sup>57</sup> Cuadros, 'Heroes,' 50.

<sup>58</sup> Cuadros, 'Heroes,' 50.

<sup>59</sup> Cuadros, 'Heroes,' 51.

<sup>60</sup> Cuadros, 'Conquering Immortality,' 137.

cowardice and contrition, was typical in the opening years of the epidemic<sup>61</sup> – and an injurious imperfection, something beautiful and something malignant. Cuadros perforates his skin, allowing his blood to flow and to spread in the water, as an offering to his love object and as an act of sacrifice. Once again he appropriates Catholic iconography, empathising with the kitschy crucified figure of Christ hanging from the chrome enema hose, “red oil [dripping] from the small marks in his forehead, palms, and feet.”<sup>62</sup> The blood seeping from his body imbibes spectres of consanguineous kinship in which blood flows between members of a familial group; yet here, the flow of blood is not engendered by heterosexual reproduction but by a viral agent which has been passed onto him by his white lover during unprotected anal sex.

I evoke umbilical anuses to name the complex interaction of vertical inheritance and horizontal relatedness in Cuadros’s prose. For whilst the narrator-self cannot relinquish the significance of his biologically given family – indeed his heritage pervades his consciousness – he also seeks a dislocation from his *familia*, exploring the limitations of affective interracial alliance through shared serostatus and erotic investments. Whilst the umbilicus denotes the ordered routing of blood, a substance ensconced in the normative reproduction of progeny and the erroneous fallacy of “natural” kinship, the anus encodes experimental forays into expanded kinship, forays which saturated queer discourse after the devastation of HIV/AIDS in the West.<sup>63</sup> Yet, I contend, Cuadros pushes kinship to the conceptual limits by tracing the myriad ways that affective alliance becomes complicated by legacies of colonialism and rhetoric of mestizo/a hybridity, a form of racial identity politics which eschews racial exclusivity by imagining the replication of bodies within other bodies.

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<sup>61</sup> In 1986 artist Tim Rollins and ‘Kids of Survival’ created a series of collages entitled *The Red Badge of Courage IV (After Stephen Crane)*. Printed pages taken from Crane’s 1895 novel were adorned with impressionistic wounds which resembled KS lesions, violent embodiments of narratives of struggle and survival in impoverished communities and indicators of the escalating AIDS epidemic.

<sup>62</sup> Cuadros, ‘Heroes,’ 51.

In *Borrowing Time: A Latino Sexual Odyssey* (Mountain View, California: Floricanto Press, 2003), a play on Paul Monette’s iconic 1988 AIDS memoir *Borrowed Time*, Carlos T. Mock consistently links his experiences as a gay Puerto Rican man with AIDS to the suffering and sacrifice of Jesus in the Catholic faith. He compares living with AIDS to a state of purgatory, analogises sexual communion as the Eucharist, and imagines the confessional box as a glory hole.

<sup>63</sup> See Kath Weston, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); Judith Butler, *Antigone’s Claim: Kinship between Life and Death* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Judith Butler, ‘Is Kinship Always Heterosexual?’ *Differences* 13, no. 1 (2002), 14–44; Elizabeth Freeman, ‘Queer Belongings: Kinship Theory and Queer Theory,’ *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies*, ed. George E. Haggerty and Molly McGarry (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2007); Damon Young and Joshua J. Weiner, ed., ‘Queer Bonds,’ special issue, *GLQ*, 17: 2–3 (2011).

## Viral Colonisation

In a 2011 *Social Text* article discussing the ambivalent representations of viral containment Ed Cohen argued that “viral virulence proposes a scalar narrative that confers agency on ‘a virus’ as an originator of intracellular changes that turn a cell’s proper processes away from their pre-scripted aims by offering them a new script – quite literally.”<sup>64</sup> For Cohen, viruses are facilitators of genetic change, disassembling agents able to disrupt the perceived sovereignty of biologically engendered bodies, voracious progenitors, sires to their own unorthodox viral lineage. Cohen’s nod to “pre-scripted” (read prescriptive) aims is clearly redolent with connotations, fashioning viral transmission as a threat to the ordered working of the body; this is key, as viruses have historically been seen as parasitical matter disseminating through networks of unsanctioned sexuality to rupture the sanitised teleology of the normative, healthy form. The body becomes an unstable terrain in this analogy, simultaneously exposed to the assault of viral matter and entrenched in a symbiotic melee.

I argue that the containment and reproduction of HIV in the body becomes further complicated when the transmission of viruses is situated within economies of unequal racial exchange. Furthermore, I contend that the cessation of cellular memory and the redirection of the genealogical “script” are often problematically imagined as moments of colonisation, a term which speaks to a beleaguered history of Latino/a marginalisation in the U.S. Within Cuadros’s work, I posit, HIV signifies the corporeal consequences of sexual contact within tense dialectics of (often exploitative, always ambivalent) interracial desire. Here the territorialising of HIV in the brown(ed) body of the Latino narrator-self facilitates a diversion of kinship lines, imagining alternative forms of extendibility whilst acting to dislocate the pervasive presence of the ancestor through cross-racial same-sex intimacy. Certainly Cuadros’s work attempts to engage with the conceptually sticky terrain of viral penetration (a highly stigmatised and fetishised phenomenon) as an intervention into and a corporeal consequence of processes of racialisation and deracination.

The alignment of viral penetration with colonisation is rather a tired analogy. In *AIDS and the Body Politic: Biomedicine and Sexual Difference* (1996) Catherine Waldby writes:

The microscopic world is on a mission to colonise the human, to render the human body an extension of bacterial and viral interests [thus viruses] are an ontological

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<sup>64</sup> Cohen, ‘The Paradoxical Politics of Viral Containment,’ 25.

threat because they challenge the status of the human, because viral infection involves the colonisation of human genetic identity with viral genetic identity.<sup>65</sup>

Such metaphors play on the visualisation of the virus as a conquering force, able to alter the very identity of the host by infiltrating the body-state and procuring genetic code. Although undeniably seductive, these analogies rarely tease out the racial connotations which often attend narratives of colonisation, preferring to view the body as a raceless paradigm, flattened to democratising neutrality by the assault of the viral other. Even when viruses are discussed as “foreign” interlopers or “alien” aberrations, little effort is exercised to unpack the suggestive prejudices masquerading as innocuous metaphors. Furthermore, the tacit conflation of viruses with colonisation fails to factor for alternative readings which position virus and host as symbiotic allies, as I shall discuss.

But how can we think through the concept of colonisation when seroconversion and viral exchange happens between racially discordant people, without resorting to stereotypes of the dark, infecting other? How can we think through viral colonisation when the appropriation of cells happens in those bodies that have often been formed in relation to the sexual exploitation of colonised populations? And if colonial regimes have historically relied upon rigid systems of separation and, as Étienne Balibar asserts, the strict categorisation of *who counts as human*, how can the interpenetration of viral matter (posited as a quasi-life-form) and host undermine these prejudicial principles whilst displacing notions of the virus as a necessarily dehumanising referent?<sup>66</sup> In light of such questions, I wish to unpick the inscriptions of viral colonisation in Cuadros’s writing; I structure my exploration of viral colonisation in relation to the reproduction of the virus in the body (playing upon notions of the sexual exploitation of female bodies under colonial regimes), the annexing and appropriation of genealogical lineages, and the ambivalent invasion of cellular makeup, a process which undermines racial specificity and exclusivity through the spectacle of the “mixed-blood” body in all its myriad manifestations.

In *Homosexual Desire* (1972) Guy Hocquenghem declares that “homosexual desire is the ungenerating – ungenerated terror of the family, because it produces itself without reproducing. Every homosexual must thus see himself as the end of the species, the

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<sup>65</sup> Catherine Waldby, *AIDS and the Body Politic: Biomedicine and Sexual Difference* (London: Routledge, 1996), 1.

<sup>66</sup> Étienne Balibar argues that “human” has always been a contested category, defined in relation to the affront of animality, and thus the bestialisation of certain racial factions evolved to sanction the idealisation of the human species and the privileged membership of this group. See Balibar, ‘Racism and Nationalism,’ *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* [1988], ed. Étienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein (London: Verso, 1991), 57-58.

termination of a process for which he is not responsible and which must stop at himself.”<sup>67</sup> However, in the wake of HIV/AIDS homosexual contact was endowed with a grim consequentiality; the gay male body was now imagined as a generating vessel, able to house, reproduce, and transmit deadly viral matter within networks of (sometimes legally prohibited) sexual intercourse.<sup>68</sup> As Dean notes, HIV “traces the persistence of multiple prior bodily contacts in the present moment,”<sup>69</sup> whilst simultaneously relying upon the promise of sexual contact in the future for its continued survival. Before the “protease moment” it became almost commonplace to imagine HIV as more than merely a fantasised means of connection between organisms; peppering the profusion of now canonical AIDS memoirs produced in the first decades of the epidemic is the image of the virus as a form of queer legacy, as a grim and permanent descendent incubated in the body.<sup>70</sup> Indeed, the question of whether viruses constitute an independent life form has long been debated in scientific circles; certainly for Cohen viruses are ambiguous life-like simulations that enter the body and reproduce in symbiosis with their host. “Their particular and particulate nature straddles the cusp of ‘life itself,’” he declares, “confusing the very notion of what living means.”<sup>71</sup>

In Cuadros’s posthumously published short story ‘Birth’ (1997), HIV is simultaneously personified as a masculine-aligned agent, infiltrating the host vessel and aiding reproduction, and the product of a synthesis of genetic material, a noxious descendent incubated in the internal space of a gay Latino man, his oft-alluded to narrator-self:

I feel it well up inside of me. It grows with every pass of the sun, steals what little energy is left in my beleaguered body. The lesions that spread daily across my testicles and legs now cease to multiply. I sense the formation of an umbilical cord connecting me to another. I am nervous of what it will become and how it will decimate the remnants of my strength. I tell my lover I am carrying a child inside me, demonlike, it drags embryonic nails slowly down my internal organs.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Guy Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire* [1972], trans. Daniella Dangoor (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 107.

<sup>68</sup> By 1981, the year that HIV/AIDS emerged, 26 U.S. States still had sodomy laws on their statutes. Laws which criminalised sodomy were only struck down by the Supreme Court in 2003 following *Lawrence v. Texas*.

<sup>69</sup> Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, 88.

<sup>70</sup> As well as in the writing of Cuadros, viral children appear in Sandoval-Sánchez’s unpublished play *Side Effects*. In *Borrowing Time* Mock compares the pain of HIV-related pancreatitis to childbirth.

<sup>71</sup> Cohen, ‘The Paradoxical Politics of Viral Containment,’ 18.

<sup>72</sup> Gil Cuadros, ‘Birth,’ *His2: Brilliant New Fiction by Gay Writers*, ed. Robert Drake and Terry Wolverton (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1997), 120.

By likening his interior space to a proficient womb, Cuadros's narrator is questioning the stability and sovereignty of his body; where once flesh, blood, and muscle knitted to bolster the wholesome form, now dwells the viral foetus, insidious yet loved, parasitical yet protected, straining at bodily boundaries, swelling interior spaces, and destroying the body. The origin of the foetus (much like the origin of HIV) is ambiguous yet the unequal, asymmetrical network of exchange which operates in heterosexual conception, rooted in the implacability of assigned biological roles (male as inseminator, female as receptacle), is obliquely echoed in this narrative of viral transmission; one man is left to carry the (viral) load of another. The child becomes a fractious emblem, signifying the promise of the reproduction of the beloved inside the self, whilst hinting at the copious dangers of harbouring another life-form, a life-form which always threatens to vitiate the energy of its host. "Until quite recently, childbirth endangered the mother's life," Dean observes, though he fails to temper this with the acknowledgment that childbirth is still an extremely dangerous undertaking in some parts of the world, "even today, babies make their parents more vulnerable to illness by compromising parents' immune systems."<sup>73</sup>

However, as my rendering of viral mestizaje makes clear, HIV transmission (like histories of interracial breeding and transculturation) between two men can never unproblematically follow lines of "straight" descent; in order to proliferate HIV must travel beyond the confines of the monogamous couple. Cuadros plays upon this: "My lover thinks he is a lowly Joseph, not important in the scheme of this miracle."<sup>74</sup> For Cuadros, infection constitutes a new unorthodox family, forging a non-normative trinity of man, lover, and viral foetus, an "internal community of radical love."<sup>75</sup> By evoking the holy family Cuadros is confronting heteronormative imperatives of legacy and reproduction, reminding the reader (in a darkly audacious manner) that Christ too defied the laws of procreation, for he was conceived outside of the sanctioned union of man and woman, husband and wife. As with the Virgin Conception, economies of HIV infection cannot be contained within a strictly normative coupling; like Joseph, the narrator's current lover has not bestowed "the gift."

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<sup>73</sup> Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, 87.

<sup>74</sup> Cuadros, 'Birth,' 121.

<sup>75</sup> Patrick S. Cheng argues that the Holy Trinity becomes relevant to the lives of queer people because it fundamentally breaks down categories. Although he does not mention HIV/AIDS in relation to the Trinity I believe that just as the Trinity queries the separation of self and other so too does the virus, which seems to exist simultaneously as both. See Cheng, *An Introduction to Queer Theology: Radical Love* (New York: Seabury Books, 2011), 56.

HIV shadows the reproductive capacity of the no longer sovereign body. The “promiscuous capacity”<sup>76</sup> of viruses is often seen as a vital process in the evolution of living organisms, producing “infectious progeny” through acts of “viral penetration,” as one bioscientific text proclaims.<sup>77</sup> The image of the promiscuous virus was a popular analogy deployed in the early decades of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, when viral transmission was likened to the “aberrant” sexual practices and presumed hedonism of predominantly gay male communities. HIV in the body was likened to infectious, reckless subjectivity on the one hand and heteronormative extendibility on the other, an entity that resides in the body as part of the self yet carries its own history, lineage, and agenda, a phenomenon I shall expand on later. I believe that the viral foetus wonderfully inscribes the problems surrounding notions of origin, heritage, and kinship in Cuadros’s texts. The child symbolises the impossibility of breaking with ideas of either origin or extendibility, for not only does the loss of origins denote colonising gestures which seek to erase specific historical narratives, to negate origins would require the establishment of another, perhaps equally pernicious, narrative. What is more, the virus itself is often depicted as having ambiguous origins and, as a pathogen that colonises DNA, is frequently utilised to portray postmodern scepticism over the possibility of pure lineages, as I discussed in the previous chapter. Finally, just as the line between inert foetus and rights-bearing infant remains a morally fractious and controversial marker in U.S. society, the rendering of viral matter as a quasi-species endowed with life-like properties is highly contested in scientific circles.

I wish to take this a step further, to ask what is at stake when HIV transmission is reimagined as generative, not merely in the form of recalibrated patterns of breeding, as indexed by the image of the viral foetus, but as an evolutionary agent, mixing and re-mastering genetic material to forge significant links between cellular organisms. ‘Birth’ concludes with a scene of chaos and acute anxiety:

I do not know if the little one will appear launched from my head, or emerge from the muscles of my legs. But when the moment happens it will be as if a part of me dies [...] my body disintegrating into the stuff of protons, neutrons, quarks, shattering back into the dark matter of an unforgiving universe.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Cohen, ‘The Paradoxical Politics of Viral Containment,’ 19.

<sup>77</sup> Sven Miller and Jacomine Krijnse-Locker, ‘Modification of Intracellular Membrane Structures for Virus Replication,’ *Nature Reviews: Microbiology* 6 (May 2008), 363-374, 363.

<sup>78</sup> Cuadros, ‘Birth,’ 122.

Once again Cuadros transposes imagery of life with that of death, subverting (and reappropriating) heteronormative fantasies underpinning reproduction and inheritance. Here the narrator's very existence is circumscribed by the longevity of the virus. The virus can only live whilst the narrator lives; the virus can only die when the narrator dies. Surviving in symbiosis, virus and host cling together, their fates intimately tied together and (inter)dependent. Although Darwinism posited viruses as parasitical invaders, vitiating the host in order to furnish their own selfish evolutionary agendas, modern theorists have subsequently argued that viruses are important evolutionary agents. Interestingly, Anzaldúa also champions evolution (an intervention which, Tuhkanen notes, is often "greeted with an embarrassed silence"<sup>79</sup> by queer theorists) as a theory which places humans in a web of relationality with all that exists: "you're all the different organisms and parasites that live on your body and also the ones that live in symbiotic relationship to you."<sup>80</sup> Anzaldúa extends the view that the body can never be a discrete or bounded structure; organic matter entering the body acts to construct and preserve the functions of the body, whilst eroding and dictating the primacy of borders. Similarly, the virus, as evolutionary device and phantasmatic foetus, traces the ontological connectedness of all (unstable) bodies, demarcating the space where disparate genealogies are solidified into the replication of life inside the bodies of gay men. In a Derridean turn the parasitical virus cannot be a mere intruder but must be situated and assimilated (which, as I explored in relation to the artwork of Felix Gonzalez-Torres is rather a loaded term, indicative of colonising gestures) into the kinship structures of its host.<sup>81</sup>

Furthermore, in the grandiosely titled *Violution: The Most Important Evolutionary Book Since Dawkins' Selfish Gene* (2009), Frank Ryan suggests that retroviruses, like HIV, may make unexpected contributions to the human genome:

It might seem counter-intuitive to consider HIV-1 as a partner to the human species, but such progressions from brutal parasitism to mutualism are typical of the symbiotic processes we see in nature. From the symbiotic perspective, the AIDS pandemic represents the first stage of the dynamic I have labelled aggressive symbiosis.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Tuhkanen, 'Queer Hybridity,' 94.

<sup>80</sup> Anzaldúa, 'Making Choices,' 158.

<sup>81</sup> Jacques Derrida states that "the parasite is by definition never simply *external*, never simply something that can be excluded from or kept outside of the body 'proper,' shut out from the 'familial' table or house." See Derrida, *Limited Inc* [1977] (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 90.

<sup>82</sup> Frank Ryan, *Violution: The Most Important Evolutionary Book Since Dawkins' Selfish Gene* (London: HarperCollins, 2009), 133.



Ryan's evolutionary doctrine chimes with Cuadros's story. The narrator offers up his body as shelter, harbouring the virus, enabling the virus to reproduce itself through the colonisation of his own genetic machinery; nevertheless the virus cannot unproblematically signify renewal or procreative immortality, for the gestation of the viral foetus ensures the narrator's destruction whilst chronicling his survival. In this sense, viral transmission through gay sex may be imagined as a form of queer(ed) legacy, the virus monumentalised as life-like matter endowed with the host's genetic material and charged with the possibility (and responsibility) of infinitely reproducing this material in the bodies of others; the virus becomes imagined as an endlessly replicating entity which darkly mimics the potentiality of what Lee Edelman terms "reproductive futurism."<sup>83</sup> Yet the assurance of futurity enveloped in the image of human offspring is no longer "wholesome" when viruses signify as progeny, and when the host's own reproductive faculties engender new non-normative viral descent groups. Edelman's critique seems to support Ryan's "aggressive symbiosis" hypothesis, for not only does the child rely on the parent for life but society becomes intimately invested in the utopian promise of the child.

"Viral transmission facilitates fantasies of connection, kinship and generation."<sup>84</sup> Dean makes this assertion based upon his observation of and participation in barebacking subcultures, and certainly this statement reverberates in my reading of 'Birth.' However, banishing HIV transmission to the ephemeral realm of fantasy is vaguely unsatisfying; HIV/AIDS is, after all, an embodied reality. In Chapter Two I argued that HIV is presented as a simulation of DNA, and as such is endowed with the perceived ability to transport genetic material from one person and deposit it in the body of another; this process not only promotes *fantasies* of connection and kinship, it physiologically brings together two separate genetic streams, modifying the DNA strand of the host, and forging affines between bodies "by commingling bits of viral genomes within them."<sup>85</sup> But what if the virus is cast as the product of interracial desire? How does race figure in the fantasy production endemic to narratives of viral exchange? And if seroconversion alters the genetic code of the host can a virus contracted via sex between men of different races perform miscegenation?

HIV is positioned as an active vector of racial materialisation and dissolution in Cuadros's work, where unprotected sexual intercourse brings the genetic material of white men into the body of the Latino narrator, nestled inside the viral agent. I argue in this thesis

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<sup>83</sup> See Edelman, *No Future*.

<sup>84</sup> Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, 87.

<sup>85</sup> Cohen, 'The Paradoxical Politics of Viral Containment,' 19.

that viral exchange and mestizo identity index the convergence of two or more genetic streams in this period, a foundational tenet of my discussion of viral mestizaje; as such it may be conceptually productive to position seroconversion within the rubric of cross-racial insemination. At the place where two gene pools meet, HIV manifests. In this way the blending of bodily fluids and the sharing of viruses through interracial sexual contact *can* be imagined as a form of miscegenation; sexual exchange not only dislocates DNA (imagined as an essential determinant of racial identity) from one body and transports it into another, it also emphasises the absurdity of identity models that maintain the separation of self and other. Although I am drawing correlations between viral transmission and human insemination, placing emphasis on the construction of racial identity through the complex and often fetishised interpenetration of genetic material, I am in no way attempting to implicitly link HIV with race, or suggest that interracial fertilisation resembles viral infection or unproblematically stands in for contamination. Rather it is my belief that Cuadros's narratives present a fascinating example of the phantasmatic conflation of HIV transmission with notions of genetic inheritance, evolution, and assembling of racial identity in the U.S. Furthermore, I am interested in the ways that Cuadros wields HIV to frustrate the recording of heteronormative kinship structures within the body, to dislocate the hold his dysfunctional, homophobic family has over his subjectivity. The internal realm becomes for Cuadros an important site of signification, the crevices and cells of his compromised body conceptualised as sexed and raced repositories; HIV penetrates these spaces, reproducing, mutating, and transforming his body and, in so doing, questioning the supremacy of genetic inheritance.

In 'My Aztlán' Cuadros explores the territorialising of HIV, imagined as disseminating from a white, male body to irrevocably alter and permanently divert the trajectory of the Latino body through non-normative sexual contact. Racial mixture as a (re)productive act of sexual engagement is dislocated from procreation alone; now viral penetration works to ambivalently corrode the primacy of heredity, and the attendant histories of heteronormative desire. Contemplating the fierce homophobia of his biological family, the narrator-self declares:

[My mother] doesn't want to think about the white man who infected me.  
"He might as well have shot you," she said once. [She] let me know that she  
turns in her sleep, sick at the thought of his dick up my ass or in my mouth. A

milky white fluid floats in my body's space, breaks into the secret bonding of her sex, my father's sex, and the marriage of their cells.<sup>86</sup>

The image of the white man's dick interjects, disrupting the narrative of vertical kinship (a quintessentially straightening relationship), rupturing the connection between mother and son; his lover's "milky white" semen reflecting and usurping the mother's milk; here the white man's cum lends emotional nutrition whilst impeding the very immune system that, in infancy, was galvanised by these maternal secretions. In an oblique transmutation, the bodies of mother and son are equalised, the narrator's internal "space" becomes indicative of the penetrated womb, the virus posited as the (white) perverse offspring of this interracial union that, rather than ensuring paternal futurity, shall inevitably destroy its host. This invasion renders the gay Latino body porous, continuously erased in the maternal imaginary until it becomes synonymous with the act of penetration, but now this moment of penetration encapsulates not merely the degeneration of a normative, masculine body but a point of rupture where racial inheritance is negated, where the reproductive promise of the raced subject is shattered by the thrusting intervention of the white phallus. The narrator's mother (re)enacts the imperial gaze, decentring the ethnic subject – construed as passive – by monumentalising the white man's penis as the prime arbiter of agency. The racial other – in this case the white man – becomes a mortal threat to the narrator's *familia(r)* cells.

In this passage HIV indelibly troubles the boundary between male and female, heterosexuality and sexual otherness. The cultural and sexual identity of the narrator is certainly multifaceted; as a product of the heterosexual impulse to procreate he cannot refute the male or the female that facilitates his queer being for he is the synthesis of both, a relic of heteronormative desire. However, he also imagines the "secret bonding" of his parent's sex – infinitely mysterious and opaque, unknowable in the narrator's gay imaginary – to be imperfect, irretrievably damaged by HIV, the heterosexual matrix splintered and warped by his illness and undermined by the vitiation of his heterosexually-constituted body.

In the shadow of HIV, Cuadros's juxtaposition of "marriage" and "cells" assumes a palimpsestic significance, encouraging oscillation between a plethora of interpretations. As the virus infiltrates the cells of the narrator, obliterating immune efficacy, it simultaneously emphasises the heteronormative inscriptions which abound in immunology: the extending, protecting macrophages which subsume alien matter – the not-self within the self – then

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<sup>86</sup> Cuadros, 'My Aztlan,' 54.

seek the corresponding helper T-cell to complete the process through the bonding, the touch, of antigens and antibodies, each designed for the other, a perfect dyad rendered essential to the maintenance of a healthy immune system.<sup>87</sup> HIV becomes positioned as the sinister degenerate that penetrates cells, replicating itself only through the corruption of previously vigorous receptacles, a dissident other that defies the laws of immunology just as the narrator's homosexuality undermines the sanctity of his parent's legitimised union. The son, rather than unifying disparate substances taken from each parent, now embodies their dissolution, signifying the failure of the male/female dyad. The rupturing of straight extendibility is simultaneously a source of anxiety *and* liberation for Cuadros's narrator, centred upon his conflicted utilisation of "break"; his body – the very vessel of his sexual and racial identity – shall be destroyed by the colonising onset of AIDS, yet this same rupture acts to gloriously undermine heteronormative convention, to tear asunder that which "marriage" has brought together.

But what if the penetrated cells of the narrator are imagined to hold a specifically racialised cultural history as well as a blueprint for the "healthy" union of man and woman, husband and wife? As one scientific source reveals, colonisation is always already a pervasive presence in the cellular anatomy of mestizo populations:

Interestingly, despite the fact that European colonization occurred centuries ago, Latin Americans still preserve the genetic heritage of the local (in many cases now extinct) Native populations that mixed with the immigrants. This connection with the past has not been erased despite the current high mobility of individuals. Furthermore, it brings to life the "brotherhood" of each Latin American population to the Native populations that currently inhabit different countries.<sup>88</sup>

It is clear that the complex kinship structures that blood-mixing engenders, an interaction that Dean's research uncovers in relation to HIV-induced "bug brotherhoods," not only indexes a turbulent history of colonisation, it also traces the ways colonisation is manifested within bodies, permanently inscribed in cellular repositories yet unable to erase the genetic prevalence of indigenous heritage. The term "brotherhood" is particularly loaded; it suggests a masculine-aligned dissemination of kinship construction, emphasising the capacity for white, male colonisers to forge bonds of blood with and between native populations. However, such terminology also limits the significance of female positioning

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<sup>87</sup> Mary Catherine Bateson and Richard A. Goldsby, *Thinking AIDS: The Social Response to the Biological Threat* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1988), 31.

<sup>88</sup> Public Library of Science, 'Genetic Study of Latin Americans Shed Light on a Troubled History,' *ScienceDaily*, 20 March 2008, web. [www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/03/080320205224](http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/03/080320205224). Accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2012.

and works to impede (or maybe merely reflect) native women's agency in creating their own lineages.

If histories are encoded into the genetic annals of mestizo bodies, how does HIV act to scramble these cellular archives, and provoke a permanent, irreversible cessation of this genetic litany? Recent admixture mapping may attempt to define genetic predisposition to disease yet fails to account for a virus that actually works to discombobulate cells and compromise the immune system, the very repository of bodily memory. And if, as virologist Luis P. Villarreal attests, a virus genome can “permanently colonize its host, adding viral genes to host lineages,”<sup>89</sup> what forms can this colonisation (with all its attendant connotations) take when the (invading) viral progenitor is white and the (established) host lineage is decidedly not? Through the conversion of viral RNA to complementary human DNA in a process known as reverse transcription, HIV, as a retrovirus, insinuates itself into its new host's genetic makeup, “splic[ing] into the DNA of the host cell,” as Jaap Goudsmit evocatively recounts, to add “its own subversive instructions.”<sup>90</sup> In Goudsmit's analogy the assimilation of foreign matter triggers the cell-division cycle, allowing the virus to replicate and multiply via the usurpation of the host cell's innate reproductive machinery. This strategic replication uncomfortably chimes with narratives of colonial sexual violence, a spectre haunting Latino/a identity in the U.S., for if the conquistadors exploited the reproductive functions of indigenous women to extend their lineages (and their political agendas) through racially-mixed progeny, then HIV darkly mimics this process.

The image of violated internal bodily space continues to resonate for Latino/a populations in the American Southwest. Indeed the Mexica Movement, a contemporary indigenous rights educational organisation based in Los Angeles, views mestizo/as as embodied residues of European conquest, a people composed of “raped DNA.” On their website they claim: “We have been impaled by this defiling of our Nican Tlaca (Indigenous) DNA and we have needlessly been lessened in the clarity of our identity and our heritage.”<sup>91</sup> Here cellular makeup becomes a penetrated conduit and the inner recesses of the mixed-blood body are rendered susceptible to the transhistorical ramifications of gender, sexual, racial and cultural molestation. Ironically, during the colonisation of the Americas by Europe, unprotected sex was employed as a strategic means of purifying the blood of “the native.” It was imagined that the confluence of genetic material through fluid

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<sup>89</sup> Luis P. Villarreal, ‘Are Viruses Alive?’ *Scientific American* 291: 6 (December, 2004), 105.

<sup>90</sup> Jaap Goudsmit, *Viral Sex: The Nature of AIDS* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), xv.

<sup>91</sup> This information comes from the Mexica Movement website: <http://www.mexica-movement.org/timexihcah/thecrime.htm>. Accessed 23rd May 2013.

exchange may actually act to *whiten* the blood of the other. Evidently, in 1980s and 90s America, the compromised immune system was not the only entity perpetuating cultural amnesia in and through the body, as I shall explore further in the following chapter; for organised, politicised factions such as the Mexicas the cloying residues of colonial (s)exploitation running in the (mixed)blood undermined narratives of embodied memory as perniciously as any virus.

Therefore, how can viral miscegenation play out for those subjects whose lineages have already been circumscribed by the sexual negotiation of brown bodies by white men? In his erotic relations with his white lovers Cuadros illuminates the historical unfolding of colonial conquest in the American Southwest. In Cuadros's writing, whiteness is endowed with the power to redirect biological kinship lines; however, Cuadros does not readily comply with the occlusion of legacies of colonisation and the perpetration of violence upon the brown body in the West. The narrator of 'My Aztlan' cannot comfortably integrate his racial identification with his same-sex yearnings; his desire for white men is transformed into alienation from his own brown body and works to dissolve historical narratives predicated on race, nation, and belonging:

I became white too, uncolored by age in his over-forty crowd. For our sake, I kept Sleepy Lagoon, Indian massacres, and insecticides taboo subjects to avoid arguments and misunderstandings. My lover played no part in these atrocities. I believed that the color of our skin didn't matter, there was only he and I in this affair. He offered his life and I ate greedily. Like a disease-ridden blanket, revenge was on my parents, to be gay and not speak Spanish.<sup>92</sup>

The narrator is inclined to view, and ultimately censor, his cultural experiences through the lens of this white gay milieu. The atrocities plaguing his cultural history cannot be bleached from his consciousness, yet his inclusion in white space is perpetually contingent

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<sup>92</sup> Cuadros, 'My Aztlan,' 56.

Sleepy Lagoon indexes the alleged murder of José Díaz in August 1942 near a popular Latino bathing spot in Los Angeles. Thought to be the result of pachuco infighting the criminal trial deployed several strikingly racist stereotypes and police bias that interfered with due process. These included the assumption that Chicanos were biologically predisposed to violence and that the zoot suit attire, which the defendants were forced to wear during the course of the trial, stood testament to their hoodlum traits and in antithesis to American patriotism and financial prudence in wartime. The Sleepy Lagoon murder is often seen as a precursor to the Zoot Suit riots of 1943. Indian massacres and diseased blankets hint at the long history of violence perpetrated on ethnic minorities, reaching backwards to European conquest, and the biological genocides which depleted indigenous populations. The mention of insecticides may reference the documentation of cancer clusters and birth defects predominantly affecting Mexican-American children in McFarland, California in 1979-88, thought to be the result of pesticide poisoning. These events were fictionalised by Cherríe Moraga in her 1992 play *Heroes and Saints*, which also makes allusions to the contemporaneous AIDS epidemic, manifested through the experiences of Mario, a young gay Chicano character.

on their sublimation, predicated on the fantasy that his youthful condition ensures his subservience and his veneration, erasing or neutralising his race in an attempt to assuage white guilt and ignore questions of culpability. His race is represented as a fetishised source of erotic consumption, positioned (literally) in the precarious crevices of stylised gay white male culture: “they would let me rest, small, unintimidated, in the folds of their leather, they would rub my nose in their heat. They said stuff like, ‘Hot latin, brown-skinned, warm, exotic, dark, dark, dark.’”<sup>93</sup> Here the intricacies, complexities, and contradictions of his identity cannot be adequately reconciled; his cultural affiliations must always be referred or performed in deference to white men. Within this gay West Hollywood subculture the narrator’s race is casually dismissed, perpetuating the cultural violence already entrenched in his ethnic history, a move which the narrator is nevertheless complicit in. As Tomás Almaguer suggests, writing on the privileged status of post-WWII “gilded ghettos” – predominantly gay white male urban spaces – “the diminished importance of ethnic identity among these individuals, due principally to the homogenizing and integrating impact of the dominant racial categories which defined them foremost as white, undoubtedly also facilitated the emergence of gay identity among them.”<sup>94</sup> Almaguer links the emergence of legible gay identity in the U.S. to the reinscription of reductive racial categories and hierarchical binary oppositions. The sexual alliance forged between bodies is contingent on both the erasure and the fetishisation of race and ethnicity.

In the passage cited above the pernicious residues of deracination and the material legacy of histories of colonisation form a shifting tableau of anxiety, which also functions as an effect of HIV transmission. The symbol of the diseased blanket proffered by white colonising factions as a form of biological genocide against indigenous communities is transformed into an emblem of the narrator’s conscious repudiation of familial affinities; he wields HIV as a weapon that may dislocate the claim his family has to his life and subsequent lifestyle. He internalises this violence and projects it back onto his parents, as AIDS melts into an overarching historical tract of ethnographic oppression, becomes implicated as another component of a violent historical narrative that extends into the past and shall project into the future.

## **Holey / Holy**

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<sup>93</sup> Cuadros, ‘My Aztlan,’ 58.

<sup>94</sup> Almaguer, ‘Chicano Men,’ 264.

In his first published poem, 'Valencia' (1989), Cuadros defers his queer sexual desires into the erotic act of eating an orange:

Lunch on the grass  
watching him jog  
day after day  
I peel back the rind  
it's a game  
to see it all come off  
into one large piece  
the taste runs under my nail  
hiding something sweet  
to suck on.<sup>95</sup>

Penetration not only symbolises a recurring source of anxiety, nor fundamentally represents a privileged vector of both hetero- and homosexual exchange; when discussing the viral excavation of the mestizo body, penetration also enacts an erasure of borders, an opening up of bodies historically and theoretically defined by the constant interruption of bodily integrity. Indeed, penetration as a mode of inter-personal connection is central to both HIV/AIDS discourse and anti-miscegenation rhetoric. In Cuadros's work, the body as a bounded space is simultaneously an erroneous construction, a fantasy maintained to enhance the pleasure derived from the taboo-ridden act of interracial gay anal sex, and a necessary fiction, deployed to restrict the signifying import of the socially transgressive body, as 'Valencia' makes clear. In his discussion of mestizaje Pérez-Torres asserts that "the mestizo body inherits an untenable dichotomy involving numerous forms of erasure and presence"<sup>96</sup> (a statement that also echoes in relation to miscegenation), yet it is clear that such a binary inscription occludes the complexity of the mestizo condition, which involves alternative modes of transformation, adaption, and materialisation, bucking the facile process of moving between stable states of absence and presence. Dialectics of erasure and presence were likewise adopted to describe people with AIDS in the early decades of the epidemic, due in part to the spectacle of KS lesions and the corporeal dematerialisation of the wasting syndrome. This section will explore representations of penetration in Cuadros's works. I argue that Cuadros presents bodies as unstable, penetrable entities. Furthermore, the transgression of bodily boundaries ruptures and transforms racial and cultural identity.

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<sup>95</sup> Gil Cuadros, 'Valencia,' *The James White Review: A Gay Men's Literary Quarterly*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (Summer 1989), 4.

<sup>96</sup> Pérez-Torres, *Mestizaje*, 7.



Therefore, how does penetration signify when the body is hailed as a testament to sexual *and* racial identity formation? In the seminal essay ‘Is the Rectum a Grave?’ Bersani presents “the gay male body” as a surface upon which fantasies of normative manhood are deconstructed; in this analogy, the anus becomes a sepulchre where defunct masculinity is buried, where the unified, coherent ego is shattered. He states:

If the rectum is the grave in which the masculine ideal (an ideal shared – differently – by men *and* women) of proud subjectivity is buried, then it should be celebrated for its very potential for death. Tragically, AIDS has literalized that potential as the certainty of biological death, and has therefore reinforced the heterosexual association of anal sex with a self-annihilation originally and primarily identified with the fantasmatic mystery of an insatiable, unstoppable female sexuality. It may, finally, be in the gay man’s rectum that he demolishes his own perhaps otherwise uncontrollable identification with a murderous judgement [grounded in the sacrosanct value of selfhood].<sup>97</sup>

Bersani views the toppling of masculine hegemony through sex as profoundly liberating, tempered by the widespread effects of the AIDS pandemic which has entrenched the interconnection between gay anal-centric desire and death. But how can Bersani’s theory, which fails to adequately critique whiteness as a position undergirding heteronormative and homonormative conceptions of identity, resonate within a critical race paradigm? Positing anal penetration as a quintessentially transgressive act of disavowed manhood – a move that a collective “we” *should* embrace, as Bersani authoritatively implores – merely maintains hierarchies that fashion white male bodies as the focus of an academic gaze by negating the danger fragmentation may pose for postcolonial subjects. It may well be a shrewd move to glorify the death of the heteronormative male at the hands of queer eroticism, but the shattering of subjectivity also works to place race under erasure, when it deconstructs subjectivities that congeal around a multiplicity of difference(s). One may align Bersani’s call to annihilation through penetration with colonising gestures that seek to erase the queer body of colour; can the opening up of bodily surfaces (notable for their racial neutrality in Bersani’s essay) be detrimental to narratives of cultural memory and racialised historical scripts. For if, as Lee Edelman proffers, gay male desire has facilitated the “annulling [of] the subject in the pleasurable receptivity of the anus,”<sup>98</sup> has signalled

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<sup>97</sup> Bersani, ‘Is the Rectum a Grave?’ 29-30.

<sup>98</sup> Edelman, *Homographesis*, 100.

the demise of the white, imperial male subject, divested of phallogentric agency, has the raced, postcolonial gay male subject also met his downfall? And how does disavowed subjectivity signify for mestizos, a faction negotiating racialised power dynamics and attempts to de-legitimise and dis(re)member brown bodies? This humiliation of brown bodies often occurs by portraying them as feminised vessels, vulnerable to penetration (seen as both an act of debasement and a reflection of malleable, ineffectual national borders), an insidious move which has intensified since 9/11.<sup>99</sup> As Chicana feminist Emma Pérez argues, to theorise the body as a mechanism functioning outside of the dictates of history and memory colludes in the negation and colonisation of bodies of colour.<sup>100</sup>

However, this annihilation of masculine subjectivity through penetration of the raced body has also been deployed as a discursive scourge directed towards representations of homosexuality in non-white culture. For example in the now infamous *Soul on Ice* (1968) Eldridge Cleaver accuses black homosexuals, refracted through the figure of James Baldwin, of colluding in a “racial death-wish” that positions black men in the position of the always subservient and constantly degraded bottom (a position tacitly linked to a despised female passivity in an overtly misogynist offering), which keeps intact the integrity of white subjectivity whilst dissolving black masculinity through the ever-penetrating white phallus. Cleaver employs rhetoric of miscegenation to suggest that the material effects of interracial gay sex are not a “little half-white offspring,” but the destruction of racial pride and mental competency.<sup>101</sup> Here the breakdown of racial purity, the transformation of what the races are or rather what they are *imagined to be*, is engendered by same-sex desire, the procreative capacity of sex couched in language of degeneration.

Tempting as it may be to dismiss Cleaver’s remarks as bigoted effusions, they nevertheless signify the problematic relationship between racialisations of queer male bodies and narratives of penetration at the end of the twentieth century. Indeed in her discussion of the debasement of bodies marked as “queer” and “black,” Stockton theorises the anus as a signifying orifice, a site of memory which holds a distinct (racialised)

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<sup>99</sup> Jasbir K. Puar argues that in the wake of 9/11 the spectacle of the brown body penetrated and thus humiliated by symbols of U.S. imperialism began to saturate cultural ephemera. For example, days after the attack on the World Trade Center posters appeared in Manhattan depicting a caricature of Osama Bin Laden being sodomised by the Empire State Building, bearing the legend: “The Empire Strikes Back...So you like skyscrapers, huh, bitch.” Similarly, Saddam Hussein began to be referred to as “Sodom Hussein.” As Puar argues, “At this historical juncture, invocation of the terrorist as a queer, nonnational, perversely racialised other has become part of the normative script of the U.S. war on terror.” See Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 37.

<sup>100</sup> Emma Pérez, *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

<sup>101</sup> Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1968), 102.

history.<sup>102</sup> Here the rectum becomes a repository of racial and cultural identity as well as an enticing receptacle for the usurpation of normative masculinity; in this paradigm penetration is endowed with momentous significance. Intriguingly, for Cuadros, the ingestion of AIDS medications also marks a point where bodily penetration enacts processes of deracination. In the short story 'Hands,' published in the exhibition catalogue for the 1995 art exhibition TranscEND AIDS in Los Angeles, Cuadros declares, "my face discolours from all the medications I take"<sup>103</sup> whilst in the autobiographical article 'The Emigrants,' which chronicles his lifelong friendship with photographer Laura Aguilar, he writes: "Laura wanted to work on her tan, to achieve a darkness only Latina women could accomplish. I, on the other hand, [could not]. AZT reacts badly to the sun."<sup>104</sup> Having HIV in his bloodstream affects Cuadros's ability to appear raced; his racial identity is compromised by the transformative effects of his HIV drug regimen. This is extended in 'Heroes': "My skin *changed color* too, slightly orange from a MAC prophylactic medication I took [...] People constantly stopped me on the streets or in the stores, asking where I was from, staring at my glowing skin [...] They would be amused with my answer – California."<sup>105</sup> Now the medications place him in the position of the fetishised other; penetration, in its various forms, of the brown body becomes resituated as a component of racial politics.

Therefore, how can penetration be conceptualised when the body is not a bland surface, but an entity forged in relation to colonialism, miscegenation, and the assault of viral otherness? I would argue that throughout Cuadros's works penetration acts as an ambivalent device that both disrupts and encodes the coherency of the raced body. In the vast majority of his short stories and poems the narrator-self is placed as a sexual bottom and exotic other, exclusively attracted to white men who are "not afraid to put bruises on [his] body or to kiss [him] on the lips."<sup>106</sup> The ambivalent economy of anal eroticism as a feature of interracial attraction is graphically explored in 'Heroes':

All my sex fantasies begin with my being owned by an older white man [...] When he comes he howls like a blood thirsty animal under the full moon, waking timid neighbors, too afraid to pound the common connecting walls of our apartments. They think of limbs and torso bruised, a spouse with blackened eyes, a lover stabbed repeatedly, a dark man jailed for his rage, released into a quiet, ignorant

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<sup>102</sup> Stockton, *Beautiful Bottom*, 6.

<sup>103</sup> Gil Cuadros, 'Hands,' *TranscEND AIDS: Work by Los Angeles Artists with HIV/AIDS*, December 1-17, 1995, 16.

<sup>104</sup> Cuadros, 'The Emigrants,' 90.

<sup>105</sup> Cuadros, 'Heroes,' 48: emphasis added.

<sup>106</sup> Cuadros, 'Heroes,' 46.

neighborhood. They hear the crack of his hand against my ass, my scream he muffles with his fist as he shoves his still stiff and cum-dripping cock into my hole. He says he loves his white dick up my dark-brown ass.<sup>107</sup>

Racial fetishisation is certainly prevalent here. Accompanied by bestial apparitions of domestic spousal abuse and apathetic ties of community, the racialised other is positioned in the narrative as parasitic and undesirable, seeping into the docile fabric of society and contaminating from within, much like the virus these two men share. This threatening figure – monumentalised in a racist imaginary as the ubiquitous “dark man” – is supplanted by the spectacle of same-sex desire, the orgasmic screams of interracial, intra-gender (and importantly *unprotected*, his lover’s cock dripping with cum) sex transformed into the jarring rage of racialised subjectivity. The narrator’s fantasies mediate sexuality through the lens of race; the subjugation that he craves can only be experienced through the highlighting of the entire spectrum of difference(s) he inhabits. If, as Bersani insists, anal penetration enacts a form of self-annihilation in the heteronormative imaginary, Cuadros refutes this; here the force of this sex act (re)materialises the queer raced body, yet dangerously, the illumination of race is awarded by the thrusting of the white man’s penis, racial agency defined by the insertion of whiteness.

Penetration not only signifies sexual intervention in Cuadros’s writing. In a poem entitled ‘There are Places You don’t Walk at Night, Alone’ the narrator negotiates the violence of the urban streets, his homosexuality a conspicuous danger as he walks amidst Chicano homeboys and gang members in Los Angeles, the subjects of his ambivalent desire and persistent fear:

Leather isn’t thick enough  
for a Buck knife  
or a Corona  
bottle, its end  
jagged, twisted into  
a washboard stomach.  
Marc’s t-shirt turned red,  
the paramedics wouldn’t touch him.  
I filled in the holes,  
my fingers adding pressure.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Cuadros, ‘Heroes,’ 46.

<sup>108</sup> Gil Cuadros, ‘There are Places You don’t Walk at Night, Alone,’ *City of God*, 113.

Now the thrusting appendage is transformed into a knife and a bottle, tearing into the queer body; the fact that the paramedics will not touch the man's blood interpellates him as homosexual. Pain and violence open up the body, facilitating the penetration of the self by the other; at the site of bleeding the narrator infiltrates the porous body, pressing his fingers into the hole. Holes – as evidenced throughout my argument – are repeatedly encoded in Cuadros's work, impersonally inscribed orifices which nevertheless connect the narrator to highly personal aspects of his often ambiguous, constantly ambivalent, subjectivity: to his family (through the umbilical cord scar), his queer sexuality (through the anus), and his racial identity (through the perforation and transformation of his brown skin). Although a scene of racial unrest, the true violence of the debacle shifts throughout the stanza; the body may be opened up by the threat of cultural disharmony, but it is allowed to bleed by the homophobic dismissiveness of the paramedics.

In 'Unprotected,' a short story from *City of God*, the narrator-self has unsafe sex with an anonymous trick. After confessing his positive serostatus, which nevertheless results in unprotected anal intercourse, the narrator leaves the trick's apartment in the Hollywood hills, descending to catch a bus "filled with Mexicanos"<sup>109</sup> returning to East Los Angeles. As he gazes at the sea of brown bodies confined in the cramped bus, he realises that his very belonging in this overtly racialised space has been compromised by his previous sexual encounter with the white man: "I was afraid they could smell the shit that was in my beard, see the sticky shine of cum over my body, and know what I had done that night. Each one of those short, stocky men with their black hair and Indian profiles would know."<sup>110</sup> Ever conscious of his conspicuous presence, the narrator recoils from physical contact with the men. "The seat next to me was empty until a young Mexican man sat down," he recalls, "I pulled my legs together, closing them tight."<sup>111</sup> As Paul Allatson observes, here the narrator attempts to limit the sexual and racial signifying import of his indiscrete body by restricting his corporeality in normative space, hoping to signify as neither Chicano (set apart from the Mexicanos) nor queer.<sup>112</sup> His ability to assume a stable racial identity is constantly circumvented by his intimate relations with white men. In this example, he uses his body – branded with the cum and shit of his white lover – to reinforce separation, to keep others from impeding on his always contingent modicum of privacy, a privacy obliterated by his skin colour, his American accent, and the messy sexual residues flagrantly imprinted on his body.

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<sup>109</sup> Gil Cuadros, 'Unprotected,' *City of God*, 69.

<sup>110</sup> Cuadros, 'Unprotected,' 69.

<sup>111</sup> Cuadros, 'Unprotected,' 69, 70.

<sup>112</sup> Allatson, 'My Bones Shine in the Dark,' 36.

There is a rather telling scene in ‘Unprotected.’ Upon entering the white trick’s luxurious apartment in the Hollywood hills the narrator notes the lack of curtains: “Coming back out on the balcony he said, ‘I have nothing to hide.’ I looked around: there were no curtains, no blinds. ‘Just doors,’ I thought.”<sup>113</sup> The trick’s willingness to abandon privacy is inconceivable for the gay Latino narrator – “I had to hide everything”<sup>114</sup> – and sets up an uncomfortable hierarchy to which the trick is oblivious. His white skin and financial security allow him to open up his life to the voyeuristic scrutiny of others whilst retaining his right to reside behind the protection of doors, to construct his own spatial boundaries, a privilege the narrator-self does not have. Once again, penetration is obliquely encoded here, but now as a feature of financial privilege which constructs privacy as an inalienable right. Cuadros hints that the gay Latino narrator must adopt new strategies to manoeuvre the dual threat of detection and erasure. He must relinquish the stabilising lure of identity politics and embrace an amorphous fluidity if he is to survive in a racist, homophobic society.

In the final part of this chapter I wish to consider communion as a mode of alliance that functions through the bringing of the spiritual other within the self through acts of penetration, collaboration, and the sharing of bodily fluids. Catholicism is a powerful referent in Cuadros’s work, an ambivalent residue of his upbringing; indeed by naming his collection of short stories and poetry *City of God* Cuadros was evoking the Augustinian treatise, positioning himself betwixt heaven and the urban metropolis, caught between life and death. Inscribed as hypocritical burden *and* erotic investment, religion functions in his texts to highlight the fallacy of stable bodily boundaries; he luxuriates in the many ways that the gay Latino body can be transgressed, extended, and dissolved. Furthermore, Cuadros utilises religious iconography to audaciously comment on HIV/AIDS, often proffering uncanny similarities between the two.

In the short story ‘Penance,’ published in the hand-produced periodical *VIVA Arts Quarterly*, Cuadros assembles a scene of religious devotion gone awry. Kneeling before the alter in a posture of feigned remorse, Cuadros’s narrator-self is approached by an aged priest and invited to watch as the priest undresses before clambering on to a large, wooden crucifix, preparing himself to hear the narrator’s confession. As he listens to the narrator’s elaborately constructed disclosures – “I pretended a man’s penis was the host, said the body and blood of Christ, let the man’s come into open sores in my mouth”<sup>115</sup> – the priest

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<sup>113</sup> Cuadros, ‘Unprotected,’ 64.

<sup>114</sup> Cuadros, ‘Unprotected,’ 64.

<sup>115</sup> Gil Cuadros, ‘Penance,’ *Sexy and Spiritual: VIVA Arts Quarterly* (Fall 1993/Winter 1994).

thrashes and moans, penis erect, feeling the sins of the gay Latino congregant wrack his body with delicious pain. As he reaches climax, he brandishes some golden coins, paying the protagonist for his gift of performed penance.

Here the implied threat of viral transmission is framed as a religious sacrament; the *conversion* of the host (itself a doubly inflected word indicating consecrated food and a receptacle for viral matter) into the body and blood of Christ via processes of transubstantiation is likened to *seroconversion*, to the transmission of disease through sexual exchange. Is, Cuadros seems to imply, monumentalising a man's penis as a sacred object any more aberrant or ridiculous (note his use of the word "pretend") than anointing bread and wine the *literal* body and blood of Christ? Just as the ingestion (and digestion) of bread and wine enacts the territorialising of Christ in the body, so the transmission of viral matter, the interpenetration of bodies that the sharing of HIV makes manifest, denotes the presence of the figurative other in the self, the imprinting of prior contact on and through the body. The exchange of bodily fluids becomes for the narrator a means of defiance and connection; indeed barebacking proponent Scott O'Hara describes raw sex as "Communion, in the truest sense. Integral to that closeness is the knowledge that he intends to leave a piece of himself in me."<sup>116</sup> Cuadros enunciates from within this contradiction: allowing Christ to enter your body is a blessing, allowing another man to enter, a sin.

Seroconversion masquerading as transubstantiation divulges the impossibility of closed bodies and identities; for Cuadros the exploration of the erotic limits of religion offers a way to rethink transgression, as both prevalent in his cultural heritage and evident in his acts of sexual communion. In both analogies, the other gets in. Documenting his first partner's anguish over the death of an ex-lover, Cuadros writes: "Blood is there again, it rushes out of the wound / and his lover always laughs at John's horror, / twists his body, cups the fluid in his palms, offers the rich wine, adoringly, the salty flavor of memory."<sup>117</sup> Once again bodily fluids are implicated in networks of signification; here the drinking of the sacrificial wine-like blood which seeps from the lover's Christ-like wound is encoded as a gift, a way to manifest the beloved in the body, and as a repository of memory, a substance redolent with savoury history, a sanguineous vessel of queer affect.

In March 1996, five months before Cuadros would succumb to AIDS-related complications, Cory Roberts-Auli died in Los Angeles. Roberts-Auli was an HIV-positive

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<sup>116</sup> Scott O'Hara, 'Viral Communion: There's Life beyond Condoms,' *POZ*, November 1997, 69. Robert E. Goss contends that "gay men are willing to risk their health for the sake of a viral communion that encompasses elements of a transcendent spirituality of sexuality." See Goss, *Queering Christ: Beyond Jesus Acted Up* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2002), 78.

<sup>117</sup> Gil Cuadros, 'Even Months After The Death, John Dreams,' *City of God*, 124.

artist, international AIDS activist, and “Fierce Ruling Pansy-Ass Faggot”<sup>118</sup> of Irish and Puerto Rican descent who, along with Wayne Karr, was the creator of *Infected Faggot Perspectives* (*IFP*), a darkly humorous and unapologetic queer AIDS zine – a “media for the misbegotten”<sup>119</sup> – which circulated in L.A. between 1991 and 1993. Although relatively well known as a prodigious street activist, being a dedicated member of ACT UP/LA and Queer Nation, no substantial or sustained analysis of Roberts-Auli’s artistic production, outside of his editorship of *IFP*, has emerged.<sup>120</sup> However, in the limited Cory Roberts-Auli Collection housed at UCLA’s Chicano Studies Research Center (CSRC) there exists paraphernalia that attests to an important collaboration between Roberts-Auli and Cuadros. In 1994, the year that *City of God* was released, Cuadros participated in Roberts-Auli’s visual and performance art installation, *New Shrouds of Turin: The Plague Years*.

For this installation Roberts-Auli selected a diverse cross section of L.A. life, fourteen people (including Cuadros and the artist himself) of different genders, sexualities, ethnicities, races, and ages. Although Roberts-Auli’s involvement in *IFP* framed his political agenda as fiercely queer and anti-assimilationist – as evidenced by his article ‘White Men who are Gay and Other Plagues,’ which appeared in a 1992 edition of *IFP* – he was, unlike other queer and AIDS zine producers at this time, committed to forging coalitions and, as Daniel C. Brouwer attests, paying “greater attention to demographic differences that structure material differences in the epidemic, including nationality, race, sex, and class.”<sup>121</sup> Despite these differences, all of the participants were HIV-positive or diagnosed with AIDS; an open admission of serostatus was important to Roberts-Auli and very much in keeping with *IFP*’s policy of outing people they saw as treacherous, seropositive “closet queens.”<sup>122</sup> Sometimes performing to a live audience, sometimes offering latex gloves to curators, sponsors, and spectators, Roberts-Auli used a syringe to

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<sup>118</sup> Cory Roberts-Auli, *Infected Faggot Perspectives*, no. 6, February 1992.

<sup>119</sup> Stephen Duncombe, *Notes from Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* (London and New York: Verso, 1997), 15.

<sup>120</sup> In ‘The Unimaginable Future,’ written thirty years after the beginning of the AIDS epidemic, Keiko Lane remembers his friendship with Roberts-Auli and their participation in AIDS activism. See Karen Ocamb, ‘AIDS at 30 – Keiko Lane on ACT UP / Queer Nations Cory Roberts,’ June 3<sup>rd</sup> 2011. <http://lgbtpov.frontiersla.com/2011/06/03/aids-at-30-keiko-lane-on-act-upqueer-nations-cory-roberts/>. Accessed February 19<sup>th</sup> 2014.

Roberts-Auli also features in Jamie Kravitz’s documentary film *Into the Streets* (2001), which tracks the riots which broke out in 1991 in Los Angeles and San Francisco in response to Republican Governor Pete Wilson’s veto of a gay civil rights bill – AB101 – which would have assured statewide protection from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation by private employers.

<sup>121</sup> Daniel C. Brouwer, ‘Counterpublicity and Corporeality in HIV/AIDS Zines,’ *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 22:5, 351-371, 357.

<sup>122</sup> Wayne Karr, ‘AIDS-phobes make me puke,’ *Infected Faggot Perspectives*, no. 1, September 1991, 4.



extract HIV-infected blood from the arms of his volunteers.<sup>123</sup> Entreating them to strip naked, he proceeded to paint them with their own blood, a performance captured in photographs by Luz Calvo and video by fellow ACT Uper Ming Yuen S. Ma. Once completely covered with blood, they were asked to lie down upon white cheesecloth, creating the “new Shrouds of Turin,” reminiscent of Christ’s hypothetical burial robes, material marked with the figure of a man believed to be Jesus of Nazareth, which many contend still hold traces of his bodily fluids [Figure 12].<sup>124</sup>

This collaboration indexes the artist’s negotiation of sickness and the iconographies of infected blood which proliferated in the first two decades of the AIDS epidemic. Roberts-Auli challenges his audience to think about the demonisation of certain people’s bodily secretions after the advent of HIV/AIDS, to ask why some emissions are vilified and legislated against whilst others are worshipped and canonised. In the meagre catalogue accompanying the performance and exhibition of his art at Galerie Tacheles, a now closed and dilapidated Berlin based alternative arts venue, in October 1994, Roberts-Auli writes: “I believe that in using infected fluids [...] my paintings present and represent the human reality of AIDS. The continual change that the fluids undergo demonstrates how the virus is constantly changing in my body, and represents the tenuousness of my existence.”<sup>125</sup> From essential bodily fluid to artistic substance, the blood’s signifying function metamorphoses with each usage, with each change of context; here the blood is transubstantiated, transforming as it passes beyond the confines of the body.

In a photograph taken by Calvo, Cuadros poses naked smeared with his own blood. He assumes a pose of religious solemnity, his eyes raised to the heavens, one arm extending to camera, palm outstretched, and the other held above his head, his palm flat as if performing an earnest pledge. His countenance is framed by a vibrant painting depicting a white, blue, and black rectangle, emitting flares of golden light [Figure. 13]. Roberts-Auli has transformed Cuadros into a saint, encased in an impressionistic depiction of a Santeria

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<sup>123</sup> In an interview with Karen Mary Davalos, Monica Palacios, part of Teatro VIVA!, states: “VIVA sponsored this one guy, first name was Cory, I forget his last name – [Roberts-Auli]. He used his HIV-infected blood, and he either did outlines of bodies, or he sketched bodies – I don’t know what it was, but when he did his performance exhibition installation, he took [...] his HIV-infected blood out of his arm. And so we told people what was going to happen, and if they would like to wear gloves – so we purposely wore gloves to make it [...] a big deal. Pushing the envelope a bit.” See ‘Interview with Monica Palacios,’ *CSRC Oral Histories Series*, August 9<sup>th</sup> 2007, 33.

<sup>124</sup> Luis Alfaro describes this process in ‘Blood Portrait: Artist Cory Roberts-Auli Showed Us the Human Face of AIDS,’ *Cityside*, March 1996. This article is taken from the Cory Roberts-Auli Collection, 78, Chicano Studies Research Center, UCLA, University of California, Los Angeles, Box 1. Processed 2007-2008.

<sup>125</sup> Cory Roberts-Auli, ‘New Shrouds of Turin: The Plague Years,’ *Blutdruck: Die Kunst des Cory Roberts-Auli*, Galerie Tacheles, Berlin, Germany, Performance 13<sup>th</sup> October 1994, Exhibition 14<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> October 1994.

candle, a kitschy commodity percolating in Puerto Rican and Cuban culture.<sup>126</sup> The imprint of his blood-soaked form (displayed next to this photograph) resembles a grotesque, autopsied body; globules of dried paint form dark black-red rivers which stand out like hardened veins running the length of his torso and legs. The embossed face is merely a sanguineous smear, twisted with seeming anguish. Whilst the photograph is beguilingly serene, the print is jarring and brutal. The Turin Shroud speaks to a history of trauma, the emblazoned Christ-like figure branded with puncture wounds, swollen and disfigured. Yet Robert-Auli's robes also index the traumatic experiences of his participants; their blood may have been taken voluntarily but it is positioned in toxic economies of blame, fear, and approaching death.

However, by forming a collaborative endeavour based around shared serostatus and religious dogma, Roberts-Auli is also experimenting with kinship. He suggests that infected blood becomes a means of connection between people otherwise separated by difference. Within the rubric of Catholic doctrine, for example, identity is not procured via patterns of genetic inheritance but is contingent on sacramental affinity; bonds are forged through the *sharing of bodily fluids*, through the ingestion of Christ's blood in the Eucharist. Wine is aggrandised, portrayed as an innocent fluid infected with another significant "substance," the essence of Christ. Such "affective intensities"<sup>127</sup> extend the notion that one's religious family is constructed (or rather transmitted) through acts of communion; networks of affect, rooted in the ingestion of one man's blood, trounce biological kinship ties in this analogy. Furthermore, by documenting the propensity of blood to extend beyond bodily interiors, by fashioning a reflection, an oblique copy, of the self made by the flow of blood (such as is ensured by fantasies of reproduction), Roberts-Auli has questioned notions of degeneracy and annihilation surrounding representations of people with AIDS in this period. Through the reconceptualised shrouds, the blood of the HIV-positive participants continues, not in the sanctioned promise of progeny but through the immortality of the artistic mode itself.

Throughout this chapter two questions have remained paramount. How may the flow of infected bodily fluids – which viral exchange embodies – signify for those whose heritage is mired in racial admixture, forged through fluctuating webs of often unsanctioned sexual

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<sup>126</sup> Santería is a syncretic religion, produced via the interpenetration of Roman Catholicism and Yoruba, a West Indian religion. Santería is usually associated with Cuba and Puerto Rico. Having Puerto Rican origins, Roberts-Auli would have been aware of this iconography and the commodification of this iconography within the U.S.

<sup>127</sup> Gerard Loughlin, *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 6.

contact? And if HIV transmission facilitates the territorialising of the other within the self, the joining of distinct lineages through unprotected sex, how may this be conceptualised within the perimeters of interracial, gay desire? At the beginning of this chapter I questioned the validity of placing miscegenation in conversation with HIV/AIDS discourse, well aware that to ally racial mixture with narratives of contamination would always be a precarious endeavour. However, these two seemingly disparate domains have offered up a rich and capacious discursive space, teasing out the viral capacity of miscegenation whilst repositioning the racialised body within narratives of viral exchange. I would argue that viral transmission and miscegenation discourse have a strong affinity in this period, marking the site where the validity of protecting the body from the affront of otherness begins to break down. Both demarcate those spaces where bodies interact and irrevocably affect each other. Both belie the stability of bounded bodies. Both question normative notions of lineage, origin, and extendibility. And both emancipate affiliation from the constrictive limits of biological kinship models, opening up new vistas of relatedness. Whilst Anzaldúa advocates the transgression of cultural boundaries, Cohen maps the deconstruction of the bounded body, marking two forays into borderland scholarship that rarely coalesce in discourse. If global miscegenation imagines a world where all people contain each other, viral alliance makes such rhetoric tangible.

Throughout Cuadros's narratives another question looms: at what point does HIV become part of the narrator, part of his body, his history, his family, his religion, and his erotic investments? Through my discussion of Cuadros's life and work I have illuminated these instances where the exclusivity of host and parasite, self and other, brown and white begin to break down, the spaces where viral transmission bucks staid notions of evolution and degeneration to excavate new tributaries of queer alliance and viral *mestizaje*. There is a rather poignant moment in 'Heroes' when the narrator glances at his lover and spies a KS lesion, remarking that it appears to be "darker than a bruise, lighter than a birthmark."<sup>128</sup> For me, this observation offers up an apt analogy. Here, suspended between a stain of birth and a blow of culture, HIV manifests, acquired through socio-sexual contact, yet absorbed as part of his heritage, his lineage, his family. Cuadros does not sacrifice biological essentialism to the onslaught of postmodern deconstructive models of being, but attempts to excavate the spaces where these phenomena rub up against each other, provoking sites of bleeding and contamination. To speak of miscegenation is often to entrench reductive definitions of race, to fundamentally suggest that there are bounded, exclusive racial categories which may be mixed. But to speak of viral miscegenation is to question how

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<sup>128</sup> Cuadros, 'Heroes,' 48.

racial identity is constructed, contracted, and disseminated, to theorise the ways the other is present within the self. Here race becomes a substance which may be transmitted, which may enter the body and develop within the body, emphasising acts which engender racial becoming, which question the ontological complacency of ever being raced. I contend that within Cuadros's narratives, HIV transmission performs miscegenation. By bringing together different racial lineages within the body, by infecting notions of racial purity and exclusivity, by enacting processes of racial materialisation and deracination that radically alter what the races are and what they are imagined to be, by hijacking the body's reproductive function to spawn racially indiscriminate viral progeny, and by opening up the body for the insertion of otherness, the virus darkly questions what it means to be of "mixed-blood" at the end of the twentieth century.

## Chapter Four

### Mythicising Chicano (Mixed)Blood

#### Narrating HIV/AIDS in Los Angeles

Like “queer,” the moniker “Chicano/a” surfaced through activism, adopted by specific factions of Mexican-Americans as a self-styled identity, a once pejorative epithet now injected with pride. Beginning in the 1850s, the Mexican inhabitants of the recently adjusted Southwest borderlands began to lobby for civil rights and political representation; they sought to flex their collective muscle as newly fashioned American citizens.<sup>1</sup> Although significant strides were made in the following century, it was not until the 1960s that politicised Mexican-Americans began to rally around the term “Chicano/a,” an emblem of a culturally specific, often working class, brown political consciousness. This self-actualisation continued in the late 1960s with the creation of several influential Chicano/a youth organisations, the United Farm Workers Union (UFW), and the radical, nationalist activist group, the Brown Berets.<sup>2</sup> As Lee Bebout argues, *el Movimiento* produced networks of nationalist sentiment deployed through reconstituted memories of a quasi-mythological past stretching back to the Aztec empire.<sup>3</sup> For mobilised Chicano/as the past functioned as something usable, something which enabled activism and empowerment in the present.

In the 1970s *mestizaje* was conceptually deployed to link Mexican citizens with Chicano subjects through a common past; the icon of the disappeared Indian, the deceased indigenous ancestor, galvanised bonds of community and solidarity across the U.S.-Mexico border. The discursive interventions of Chicana feminism in the 1980s and 90s extended and transformed this emphasis on a glorious, complex Aztec-Chicano/a historical lineage, a narrative struggling to be remembered in the vicissitudes of Anglo-American

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<sup>1</sup> The Gadsden Purchase Treaty (1853-1854) resettled the lines of the U.S.-Mexico border. It is considered the final significant territorial acquisition made within the mainland U.S. Founded in 1855 in Los Angeles *El Clamor Público* was the first Spanish language newspaper in California. Although initially conservative it soon became an activist tabloid campaigning for Mexican-American civil rights, viewed as a significant collection of documents tracing Chicano/a empowerment. The newspaper ceased publication in 1859.

<sup>2</sup> These included San Antonio’s Mexican Youth Organisation (MAYO), the *Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán* (MEChA), and the United Mexican American Students (UMAS) founded in Los Angeles. The Brown Berets were founded in L.A. in 1967 primarily as an offshoot of student activist interests.

<sup>3</sup> Lee Bebout, *Mythohistorical Interventions: The Chicano Movement and Its Legacies* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

cultural imperialism. In the opening chapter of *Borderlands* Anzaldúa narrates a brief history of Chicano/a settlement in the Southwest yet tweaks prevailing discourse, emphasising modes of gender and sexual oppression proliferating since pre-Columbian times. In *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History* (1999), Emma Pérez ventures beyond the boundaries of sanctioned historiography, and in so doing confronts “the systems of thought that *produce* Chicana history.”<sup>4</sup>

But few critics have attempted to situate the arrival of HIV/AIDS within the narration and mythicisation of Chicano/a history. By “mythicisation” I mean the practice of constructing valuable narratives which are utilised to help explain the present realities of a community.<sup>5</sup> The AIDS epidemic, cohering as a “plague of discourse,” to appropriate Edelman’s phrase, galvanised rhetorical infrastructures which worked to contour public responses to the epidemic and towards those identities labelled as toxic and corrupting. In this thesis I have advanced a reading of viral mestizaje, a means through which gay Latinos responding to HIV/AIDS came to understand the relatedness of bodies (and the centrality of bodily fluids) in this period. In this chapter I argue that Latinos intuited the devastating effects of HIV/AIDS as a continuation of past violence and exploitation afflicting Latino/a groups in North America *and* constructed modes of resistance which tapped into glorified narratives of Latino survival in the Southwest. Documenting his experiences working in AIDS wards in San Francisco, Rafael Campo states:

The relentless spread of AIDS [was] no longer simply the documentation of losses that I had learned [...] to compile passively, losses about which nothing could be done; rather, each became a form of active violence perpetrated by the powerful against the weak, calling for an immediate, drastic, and equally purposeful response. I began to understand how one atrocity led to another: from the genocide of this land’s indigenous peoples [...] where European diseases were literally employed as weapons against native people, to the murder and starvation of mejicanos and californianos who remained in their homes after Mexico ceded its northern territories to the United States, to the ongoing American embargo of Cuba, where because of the lack of vaccines and antibiotics children continue to die each day.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, in 1993 ACT UP/New York and DIVA TV member Ray Navarro conceptualised AIDS as

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<sup>4</sup> Pérez, *The Decolonial Imaginary*, xiii-xiv: emphasis added.

<sup>5</sup> The desire to resurrect the ancient past in order to comment on the present was widely practiced in Mexico throughout the twentieth century, and came to define the murals of Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and José Clemente Orozco, as well as the philosophy of Domingo Martínez Paredes, who argued that Mayan cosmology uncannily resonated in modern scientific discourse.

<sup>6</sup> Campo, *The Desire to Heal*, 265.

an epidemic of discrimination, fear, bigotry, and homophobia, which will certainly damage the Latino communities in a way that will have deeper effects than HIV ever can. *I can only compare this to the legacy of the Conquest of Aztlan itself.* We withstood that, didn't we? Our language survived, our culture thrives, but the scars run deep and the memories are painful. And the psychological, social, and economic effects of this racist violence permeate our very souls. This is AIDS.<sup>7</sup>

However, in recent discourse, the epidemic has been presented as a crisis of memory, a barrier to the narration of gay liberation in the West; after all, how could queer communities represent a past which was now inculcated in the spread of a deadly pathogen? In *If Memory Serves: Gay Men, AIDS, and the Promise of the Queer Past* (2012), Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed assert:

the AIDS crisis became an occasion for a powerful concentration of cultural forces that made (and continue to make) the syndrome an agent of amnesia, wiping out memories not only of everything that came before but of the remarkably vibrant and imaginative ways that gay communities responded to the catastrophe of illness and death and sought to memorialise our losses.<sup>8</sup>

For Castiglia and Reed, the processes of unremembering that accompanied the arrival of AIDS worked to undermine histories of gay determination in the U.S., vibrant histories facilitated by the memories and narratives of afflicted communities. "Unremembering" and "cultural amnesia" occupy incongruous positions for these critics; whilst cultural amnesia names a state of collective denial and the wilful capitulation to a particular narrative, unremembering constitutes a pernicious attack on memory itself, on the capacity for certain people *to remember* (to re-member) their communal histories.

Furthermore, HIV/AIDS was positioned at the apex of unremembering and cultural amnesia in this period because it compromised the human immune system, the very repository of cellular memory.<sup>9</sup> HIV was consistently represented as an instigator of amnesia, not amnesia of the brain, but amnesia of the body. In a compromised immune system memory T-cells are rendered inefficacious. Thus HIV does not work to erase cellular memory but rather colonises the very site of memory, disseminating "faulty memories."<sup>10</sup> Here, the beleaguered immune system is monumentalised as a leaky prophylaxis, a dysfunctional internal barrier which allows memory to leave the body.

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<sup>7</sup> Ray Navarro, 'Eso, me esta pasando,' *Queer Looks: Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Film and Video*, ed. Martha Gever, John Greyson, and Pratibha Parmar (New York: Routledge, 1993), 39: emphasis added.

<sup>8</sup> Castiglia and Reed, *If Memory Serves*, 3.

<sup>9</sup> See Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

<sup>10</sup> Richard Jeffrey, 'The New Frontier: The Immune System,' *HIV Plus*, June/July 2000, 16-24, 23.

Invariably AIDS indexes an extreme absence of memory, allowing a parasitic fracas of opportunistic infections to capitalise on the dearth of cellular memory.

Although HIV/AIDS was constructed as a radically new disease that flummoxed scientists and public health officials alike, narratives quickly emerged that sought to root the virus in the “excesses” that accompanied sexual liberation in the 1960s and 70s; the fact that the virus was revealed to have an extensive asymptomatic incubation period fashioned it with a malignant history. Even within the communities most affected, social commentators colluded in constructing “official memories” of the epidemic. In *And The Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic* (1987), perhaps the most comprehensive example of the narration of the early years of AIDS in America, San Francisco based journalist Randy Shilts, himself a gay man who would later die of AIDS, intricately weaves a story of blame. Along with the negligent Reagan administration and a Centers for Disease Control (CDC) plagued by in-fighting, the “reckless promiscuity” of gay Canadian airline steward Gaëtan Dugas (a.k.a. Patient Zero) and the sexual immoderation of the 1976 U.S. Bicentennial celebration in New York are encoded as catalysts for the later devastation.

However, this timeline of events, whilst boasting a kind of authenticity derived from the compilation of facts, was actually assembled in deference to the *memories* of specific individuals; for example, Shilts utilised the musings and opinions of his gay informants to vindicate the Bicentennial as a key moment in the history of AIDS.<sup>11</sup> This subsequently became a trusted part of the story, appropriated as empirical evidence of the causality of the later crisis. But by infusing the actions of a select group of “promiscuous” urban gay men with culpability Shilts was simultaneously performing a guilty retreat from the presumed sexual recklessness of the pre-AIDS era; indeed his public calls to close the bathhouses caused the editor of the *San Francisco Bay Reporter*, Bob Ross, to label him “a traitor to his kind.”<sup>12</sup>

For Castiglia and Reed, such attacks on the actions of previous generations of gay men prescribed cultural amnesia as a “prophylaxis against loss.”<sup>13</sup> This loss did not merely index the decimation of gay male communities but rather signified the corrosion of past

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<sup>11</sup> Shilts, *And The Band Played On*, 142. Taking the form of a conversation between Bill Darrow of the CDC and a gay informant Shilts writes: “The man searched his memory and recalled the image of soft white sails scraping a purple night sky in New York harbor [...] ‘The Bicentennial,’ Darrow said aloud, almost to himself. ‘Of course. The Bicentennial.’ [...] The notion swept over him the way insights sometimes do, with each wave drawing more facts and connections into its wake. Nothing happened before 1976.”

<sup>12</sup> Mike Weiss, ‘Randy Shilts was gutsy, brash and unforgettable. He died 10 years ago, fighting for the rights of gays in American society,’ *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 17<sup>th</sup> 2004. <http://www.sfgate.com/health/article/Randy-Shilts-was-gutsy-brash-and-unforgettable-2794975.php>. Accessed December 12th 2013.

<sup>13</sup> Castiglia and Reed, *If Memory Serves*, 39.



infrastructures of social engagement forged through uninhibited, oppositional sexual intimacy. In *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (1999) Samuel Delany bemoans the dismantling of gay movie theatres in New York, arguing that these queer spaces facilitated forms of interclass and interracial contact which were often restricted in mainstream society. Similarly, Castiglia and Reed claim that the sex panics of the late 90s – which culminated in the mass closure of the bathhouses – and the rise of gay conservatism marked the degeneration – and the *de*-generation – of any calls for a consolidated gay community. Now young gay men sought to distance themselves from the actions of older gay men, the hedonistic generation that had brought them AIDS. For these theorists, the AIDS moment became a brutal barrier, splicing into the homogeneity of gay experience in the U.S. By effectively erasing a history, a web of individual and collective memories contained within a blighted community which could be used to define gay identity in the late twentieth century, the arrival of AIDS severed the past from the present and encouraged younger generations to look to the future as the only legitimate space for forming a queer consciousness emancipated from the burdens of guilt and shame.

However, I argue that this recitation of de-generational unremembering cannot be applicable to all self-identified gay communities. Indeed Castiglia and Reed's study performs its own feat of cultural amnesia by predominantly situating present queer interests in relation to the sexual liberation of a very specific faction of gay, predominantly white, urban men. Even the facile alignment of queerness with "official" narratives of gay and lesbian empowerment consistently works to occlude alternative modes of queer sexual expression. This way of historicising the epidemic remains inaccessible for many communities for, as Manolo Guzmán insists, "gayness is a theory of difference that is heavily invested in the maintenance of categorical distinctions and the annihilation of those liminal regions that threaten their coherence."<sup>14</sup> The conflation of queerness with whiteness remains palpable in *If Memory Serves*, positioned as the perpetually under-examined bedrock of institutionalised queer theorising in the West. Castiglia and Reed seem to suggest that gay men could only interact with AIDS as a phenomenon which threatened to destabilise their sexuality. But this fails to account for those communities that situated their queerness in alternative histories, those who approached the AIDS epidemic as a crisis penetrating all levels of their lived experiences, be it sexual, racial, ethnic, or national.

In the emerging field of gay Latino/a studies emphasis is placed on practices that utilise unconventional and often overlooked archives. As Horacio N. Roque Ramírez

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<sup>14</sup> Manolo Guzmán, *Gay Hegemony/Latino Homosexualities* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 93.

contends, in his exploration of Latino AIDS obituaries in the San Francisco Bay area (the “gay, Latino albums of the dead”), diligence and determination must be exercised to root out the scarce pattering of often uncollated and disregarded “deposits of human recollection” generated by those communities “no longer willing,” and I would add allowed, “to remember.”<sup>15</sup> It would seem that the degeneration of memory occurring around the AIDS epidemic echoed the asphyxiation of specific cultural narratives that had always already been a pervasive feature of U.S. hegemony. As Cherrie Moraga argues, remembering is always a culturally inflected process, a privilege and a burden circumscribed by racial politics in North America:

I am a half-breed Chicana. The difference between my gringo immigrant side and my native Mexican is that when gringos came to the United States they were supposed to forget their origins. My whitedaddy isn't quite sure what he is [...] my Dad's history too vague to remember because they came to this country to forget.

Mexicans don't forget. Anything. [...] And the measure of our “Americanism” (in U.S. terms), the testimony to our acculturation to U.S. culture, is our eventual forgetting.<sup>16</sup>

To enter into the ideal of the American nation-state, Moraga hints, does not foster a lacuna of memory but produces a parasitic consensus of forgetting and the narration of the nation by a fraction of privileged citizens. To identify with her Mexican heritage becomes for Moraga a clear repudiation of “Americanism,” for unlike the European immigrants who arrived on American soil to break with the past (and invent a future) the Mexican population in the borderlands became absorbed into the American nation-state due to the geographical negotiations of war and conquest, enshrined as a new commodity ushered in on the shirttails of expansion. Although Moraga rebukes processes which cleave to the permutation of the Mexican into the meek uniformity of the U.S. citizen, she does not address the dissipation of Mexican heritage into the often troublesome hybridity of Chicana identity, which always already contains the referent of whiteness. The position of the Chicano/a in relation to history and memory remains ambiguous; as Alicia Gaspar de Alba warned in the mid-90s, Chicano/as are always in perpetual danger of becoming

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<sup>15</sup> Horacio N. Roque Ramírez, ‘Gay Latino Histories/Dying to Be Remembered: AIDS Obituaries, Public Memory, and the Queer Latino Archive,’ *Beyond El Barrio: Everyday Life in Latina/o America*, ed. Gina M. Pérez, Frank A. Guridy, and Adrian Burgos Jr. (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 106.

<sup>16</sup> Moraga, *Loving in the War Years*, 162.

“wetback[s] with amnesia,”<sup>17</sup> their histories diffused in the collision of cultures, their identities distorted by the mixture of races.

In this chapter I explore how queer Chicanos in Los Angeles incorporated HIV/AIDS into the cultural narratives of their communities. I argue that after more than a century of striving to reclaim a discounted and censored past, to write their own histories and to memorialise their own achievements and experiences, the sudden devastating arrival of HIV/AIDS galvanised this communal will to remember, or rather to position forgetting as tangential to other narratives percolating in their communal ethnic and cultural histories. I argue that the cultural producers discussed in this chapter appropriated their collective histories and constructed new quasi-historical memories in order to offer support in the epidemic and in so doing, revealed the constructedness of memory and its deference to the needs of the present. I contend that in this period queer Chicano cultural producers wrote HIV/AIDS into their cultural experiences via the appropriation of a collective history, a history that since the 1960s had been widely constructed to bolster political agendas.

I begin by tracing the mythicisation of mixed-blood as concurrently a glorified arbiter of increased immunity, resulting from the admixture of diverse racial strains, and as a vilified vector of contamination, bolstering racist notions of Mexican bodies as weak and inefficacious. I contend that Chicano cultural producers implanted HIV/AIDS into this narrative, viewing the disease as a brutal repudiation of ingrained mestizo immunity *and* as another historical challenge girding an indigenous knack for survival. I continue by exploring how the detonation of Aztec iconography and the rewriting of narratives of Spanish conquest worked to illuminate the contemporary effects of AIDS in Latino/a communities. In the final two sections I analyse Harry Gamboa Jr.’s play *Jetter’s Jinx*, which links HIV/AIDS to earlier struggles by radical Chicano youth groups, before moving to the performance of Teatro VIVA! the dynamic theatre offshoot of VIVA, the first Latino/a gay and lesbian arts organisation in Los Angeles.

### **Immunity / Community**

Since the mid-twentieth century, the human immune system has been positioned as a social and discursive construct. However, until AIDS began to primarily affect those in society who were already marginalised and often despised, the “social” realm within which the

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<sup>17</sup> Alicia Gaspar de Alba, ‘The Alter-Native Grain: Theorizing Chicano/a Popular Culture,’ *Culture and Difference*, 117. “Wetback” is a slur used to indicate illegal Mexican immigrants who have entered the U.S. by swimming across the Rio Grande and into Texas.

immune system was “constructed,” its obligatory mirror, was consistently deemed arbitrary or insignificant. Ed Cohen asserts that immunity, as a bioscientific paradigm, presents the individual as a “natural unit” and in so doing “renders the social and political milieu within which this individual necessarily lives medically extrinsic or epiphenomenal.”<sup>18</sup> As Cohen contends, most modern accounts of the immune system have failed to acknowledge that immunity as an object of scientific curiosity is intimately contoured to and by the needs and demands of *specific* societies. Similarly, Paul Farmer convincingly argues that narratives which script epidemics in terms of exposure to risk and causality are insufficient to curtail their effects; “they are immodest,” he protests, “because they distract attention from the preventable social order that exacerbates biological disorders.”<sup>19</sup> The dislocation of “immunity” and “community” is made more troubling by the fact that both concepts share a lexical core (*munus*, defined in Latin as simultaneously a duty, a gift, and a tribute); immune systems and community structures inform and define each other linguistically and discursively.

I wish to reinsert the immune system into debates over communal agency whilst simultaneously deconstructing its rhetorical impunity from discussions of race, ethnicity, and culture. As I shall evidence, at the beginning of the AIDS crisis in the U.S., shadows of colonialism, histories of corporeal violation, and exclusionary narratives of racial atrophy were already palpable referents saturating immune discourse; thus to imagine the immune system as a cultureless internal vista or as a racially neutral system that fostered a democratising levelling of human experience in the face of unmitigated suffering constitutes a disconcerting disavowal. Furthermore, I contend that in twentieth century America some communities of mestizo/as began to subtly conceptualise and celebrate the immune system as a precious cultural artefact that indexed the vigour of their mixed-blood bodies. In a recently published account Juana Bordas extends this assertion:

Latinos are racial and cultural hybrids. In the plant and animal kingdom, hybrids have increased vigor and other exceptional qualities, including improved physical capacity, greater stamina, and higher yield capacity. Hybrid vigor is apparent in the strong Latino workforce, prolific population growth, and physical beauty. Latino *destino* is to infuse hybrid vigor into the American spirit – to stir salsa into the American melting pot. Latinos are living proof that being a genetic hybrid,

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<sup>18</sup> Ed Cohen, *A Body Worth Defending: Immunity, Biopolitics, and the Apotheosis of the Modern Body* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009), 274.

<sup>19</sup> Paul Farmer, *Infections and Inequalities: The Modern Plagues* [1999] (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 2001), 4.

embracing diversity, and reveling in a multicultural mélange enriches and enlivens the human experience.<sup>20</sup>

Tracking the valorisation of immunity in Chicano/a discourse and cultural production I argue that the immune system has been adopted as a semblance of Latino/a bodies that encodes the survival of a people and inscribes a collective (his)story of resilience in the face of viral genocide and social deprivation. I believe that such rhetoric directly impacted how some Chicano/as responded to and documented the emergence of HIV/AIDS in America. If the immune system is conceptualised as a discursive object that reflects a specific cultural narrative then the imaging of HIV as an instigator of amnesia becomes even more insidious and significant.

Rhetoric of immunity has certainly contoured race relations in the Americas. Racist screeds against the brown body – a degraded entity regularly constructed as foul and pestilent – have featured heavily in U.S. public health debate and policy, whilst the residue of colonial rule has exacerbated suffering south of the border. In occupied Mexico, an outbreak of typhus in 1813 raged unchecked, in large part due to disparities of wealth and limited access to resources; as George Childs Kohn attests “the cost of the ongoing Mexican struggle for independence (against Spanish rule) drained funds needed to pay for physicians and buy food for the victims.”<sup>21</sup> In 1915, at the height of the tuberculosis epidemic in Los Angeles, physician Ernest A. Sweet declared:

The Mexicans are possessed of an extremely low racial immunity, which is probably due to the large admixture of Indian blood. Their resistance has never been developed, because they have never fought the infection through successive generations. Just as in children the susceptibility decreases as age increases, so in races the further removed they are from civilization, the more susceptible they are to the disease.<sup>22</sup>

Sweet imbues racial admixture with culpability, maligning Indian blood as weak and inefficacious. In a similar fashion naturalist Louis Agassiz branded Mexicans as “effeminate progeny of mixed races, half Indian, half Negro, sprinkled with white

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<sup>20</sup> Juana Bordas, *The Power of Latino Leadership: Culture, Inclusion, and Contribution* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2013), 45.

<sup>21</sup> George Childs Kohn, *Encyclopedia of Plague and Pestilence: From Ancient Times to the Present* [1995], 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2008), 262.

<sup>22</sup> Ernest A. Sweet cited in Emily K. Abel, ‘From Exclusion to Expulsion: Mexicans and Tuberculosis Control in Los Angeles, 1914-1940,’ *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, Vol. 77, No. 4 (Winter 2003), 823-849, 834.

blood.”<sup>23</sup> For Sweet, Mexicans are childlike and uncivilised *because* they are not (in his opinion) equipped with evolved or efficient immune systems. For Agassiz, the delicacy of the Mexican constitution (to be effeminate implies physical weakness as well as inverted gender traits) sprang from the nefarious blending of black and brown, with only a sparse scattering of white blood, an erroneous exaggeration. Although purporting to express scientific rationale, these comments drip with prejudicial overtones; clearly the (re)positioning of Mexican subjects within the American nation-state – the “barbarous” brown body inhabiting the same space as the “civilised” white body – was a source of anxiety for Sweet, refracted through the authorial lens of public health debate. Seventy years later calls for the maintenance of “public health” would again be deployed to justify the forced closure of gay establishments, such as bathhouses and backrooms, in urban epicentres across America.

It is clear that Sweet and Agassiz’s comments feed into larger narratives of exclusion and segregation based around the mythicisation of raced and gendered identities. Indeed for Donna Haraway, the immune system itself is an “iconic mythic object”<sup>24</sup> forged through the pernicious debasement of specific bodies by Western science. In the groundbreaking *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (1991) she writes:

In the face of the disease genocides accompanying European ‘penetration’ of the globe, the ‘coloured’ body of the colonized was constructed as the dark source of infection, pollution, disorder, and so on, that threatened to overwhelm white manhood [...] with its decadent emanations [...] The residue of the history of colonial tropical medicine and natural history in late twentieth-century immune discourse should not be underestimated.<sup>25</sup>

Although marked by a dearth of immunity, a *lack* of resistance to the diseases of the Old World, colonised populations became actively implicated in narratives of contamination; immunological quiescence was aligned with corruption and embellished with a decadent, diseased passivity. In this context “the native” became positioned simultaneously as inert receptacle and active vector. As Haraway asserts, immune health has always been implicated in processes of mythicisation; by the twentieth century immunity had been organised as an interrelated network, the human immune system monumentalised as a

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<sup>23</sup> Louis Agassiz quoted in Rosa Linda Fregoso, *MeXicana Encounters: The Making of Social Identities on the Borderlands* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 2003), 135.

<sup>24</sup> Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, 205.

<sup>25</sup> Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, 223.

“potent and polymorphous *object* of belief, knowledge, and practice”<sup>26</sup> situated in a distinctly geopolitical paradigm. It emerged through the amalgamation of discourses pertaining to gender, sexuality, and race, and was contoured by Western definitions of normativity. Indeed in the opening years of the HIV/AIDS epidemic a Western “gay lifestyle” of presumed promiscuity and substance abuse was deemed analogous to immune suppression; the veracity of the immune system was now beholden to the dictates of identity politics and the virus furnished with sexual proclivities.

This chapter stakes the claim that during the twentieth century the immune system also became subtly inculcated as a mythic object which indexed the dynamism of mixed-blood heritage; now immune-rich blood emerged as a shared touchstone for a recalibrated and resurgent Chicano/a community. In 1925 Vasconcelos penned the foundational, if controversial, treatise *la raza cósmica*. This manifesto advocated universal miscegenation and praised Latin American nations as the foremost exponents and innovators of mestizaje. Mestizo/as became valorised in this context as the epitome of an evolved and tenacious race. He muses: “perhaps [the superiority of the mestizo] can be explained as the effect of a salutary blending of opposite elements, a spiritual genetics. The fact is new blood renews vigor.”<sup>27</sup> This daring statement, written at a time when miscegenation was still prohibited in Jim Crow America, suggests that what Vasconcelos was in fact observing was not some quasi-spiritual balancing of humours, the healthy blending of substances in the body, but the lingering residue of immune efficacy, an inherited resilience rooted in genetic diversity, descending through generations of mixed-bloods.

Despite the waning of Vasconcelos’s influence in subsequent years, the glorification of mestizo “vigour” was unequivocally reasserted in the politically turbulent if short-lived Chicano Civil Rights Movement. At this time “The Chicano,” as a cogent image and brand, was fashioned as biologically and psychologically strong, whilst blood was appropriated as a key substance of strength and survival. This is not to suggest that mestizos (or the rhetorical devices which framed representations of Chicanismo) were universally glorified as exuberant vessels overflowing with immune efficacy; rather the myth-making around Chicano vitality (political potency scripted within heteronormative genealogies of blood) intensified in this period to counteract prior representations of Latinos as weak and degenerate. But, as with all social movements that politicise homogeneity, this myth-making unfolded at the expense of minority interests, mainly those of women, lesbians, and gay men. Although terminology such as the “immune system” did

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<sup>26</sup> Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, 204: emphasis added.

<sup>27</sup> Vasconcelos, ‘Mestizaje,’ 80.

not feature in the rhetoric-laden ministrations of Chicano activists, *el Movimiento* was contemporaneous with the emergence of any cogent notion of the body's internal protective mechanisms as a single, comprehensive *system* rather than a fluctuation of various parts; both concepts (which emphasised the monolithic over the mercurial) were solidified in the 1960s and 70s.<sup>28</sup>

In 1969, three months before the events at Stonewall would stimulate modern LGBT consciousness in North America, the first National Chicano Youth Liberation Conference was held in Denver, Colorado. Organised by Corky Gonzales and 'Crusade for Justice,' the organisation he had created in 1966, the Conference adopted as its manifesto *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán*, the foundational treatise for *el Movimiento*. From the first sentence, the power of mestizo blood to provoke narratives of strong, nationalist, and politicised (albeit straight male) Chicano subjectivity was explicitly promulgated. Adapted from a poem of the same name by the Mexican born writer Alurista, the manifesto proclaimed: "[we] declare that the call of our blood is our power, our responsibility, and our inevitable destiny."<sup>29</sup> This sentimental and strategic utilisation of blood was echoed in the cultural production created to serve *el Movimiento*. In a now famous 1974 silkscreen print produced by artist Xavier Viramontes to publicise the United Farm Workers Union's national grape boycotts, an Aztec warrior glares defiantly out of the poster, squeezing bunches of grapes between his powerful hands, as red blood-like juice trickles down onto the banner of writing which reads "Boycott Grapes: Support the United Farmworkers Union" [Figure 13].<sup>30</sup> Here the legacy of the Aztec empire and the subsequent crafting of mestizaje from the blood of the Indian were invoked to foreground the contemporary exploitation of Mexican labour.

In the ubiquitous *el Movimiento* epic poem, *I am Joaquín*, Corky Gonzales declared:

Part of the blood that runs deep in me  
could not be vanquished by the Moors.  
I defeated them after five hundred years.  
and I endured.  
Part of the blood that is mine  
has labored endlessly four hundred  
years under the heel of lustful  
Europeans

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<sup>28</sup> See Emily Martin, *Flexible Bodies: The Role of Immunity in American Culture from the Days of Polio to the Age of AIDS* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 37.

<sup>29</sup> 'El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán,' *Aztlán: An Anthology of Mexican American Literature*, ed. Luis Valdez and Stan Steiner (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 403.

<sup>30</sup> The UFW was founded by César Chavez with Dolores Huerta. The grape boycotts began in the mid-60s.



I am still here!

[...]

I am Joaquín  
The odds are great  
But my spirit is strong,  
My faith unbreakable,  
My blood is pure.  
I am Aztec prince and Christian Christ.  
I SHALL ENDURE!  
I WILL ENDURE!<sup>31</sup>

Although Gonzales emphasises blood purity he does not capitulate to the rhetorical separation of clean, unmixed blood and dirty, assorted blood. Rather he celebrates racial admixture, the intimate suturing of Aztec and European bloodlines; the mingling of lineages and the mixture of blood becomes for the poet a touchstone for emotional, psychological, and corporeal endurance in the U.S. This promise to survive was repeated by Gonzales in a 1974 editorial entitled ‘We Will Endure’ in which he wrote: “we intend to survive, no matter the odds against us. We will continue with our work and encourage our people to continue the struggle for liberation despite coercion, threats, or death.”<sup>32</sup> This defiant call to survive despite the odds was taken up in 1972 by prominent Tejano activist and writer Nephtali de León: “Chicanos have endured, resisted and survived decades and centuries of attempts to annihilate them. It seems that every wave of new destruction gives them a *renewed vigor*.”<sup>33</sup> In a 1999 interview he again declared, “Chicanos have this wonderful habit of survival,” adding that mestizos are “the product of a violent encounter of incredible races. Incredible people. The Spaniards, the ones who taught the rest of the world to navigate [...] as well as, the strong incredible Aztec strain. And all the other strains that were there. So, we conic [sic] from awesome people on both sides.”<sup>34</sup> In rhetoric at least, both the Chicano subject and the functional immune system were positioned as entities galvanised by every fresh assault. For de León, this tenacity was a direct consequence of racial and cultural hybridity.

The repeated affirmations of Chicano endurance and resilience, heavily peppered with words such as “strong” and “vigour,” are most telling. Writing on the Gulf War

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<sup>31</sup> Gonzales, ‘I Am Joaquín,’ 22, 23.

<sup>32</sup> Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales, ‘We Will Endure,’ *El Gallo: La Voz de la Justicia*, 6/3 (June 1974), 2.

<sup>33</sup> Nephtali de León, *Chican@s: Our Background and Our Pride* [1972] (Publicacions de la Universitat de Valencia, 2011), 23; emphasis added.

<sup>34</sup> Nephtali de León, ‘Oral History Interview with Nephtali de León,’ Interviewer: José Angel Gutiérrez, November 10<sup>th</sup> 1999, 23, 78. ‘Tejano Voices,’ The University of Texas at Arlington, Center for Mexican American Studies. <http://library.uta.edu/tejanovoices/interview.php?cmasno=068>. Accessed 7<sup>th</sup> May 2013.

Syndrome (GWS), an amalgamation of multiple symptoms affecting army veterans deployed in the First Iraq War (1990-1991), anthropologist Susie Kilshaw notes that medical establishments consistently apply the moniker “vigour” to bolster the image of the functional immune system, to the extent that “popular notions of one’s own *vitality and health* are often expressed in terms of *perceived* immune function.”<sup>35</sup> Kilshaw claims that these rhetorical framings underscored the propagation and maintenance of narratives of nationalism and masculinity, the healthy immune system fashioned with equanimity, monumentalised as an embodied soldier defending the borders of the host body. Similarly, the strategic appropriation of vigour by groups of mobilised Chicanos covertly indexed the desire for action, political potency conflated with the functionality of racialised, masculine bodies. Although Kilshaw only awards the contemporaneous AIDS epidemic a cursory mention, the spectre of immunity defined in relation to normative constructions of masculinity and patriotic effusions of nationalism looms; clearly anxiety over AIDS as an alien and effeminising syndrome leaked into other areas of biomedical debate.

Akin to the utilisation of “vigour,” organisations tackling AIDS amongst minorities in the U.S. adopted “survival” as a pivotal motivation which tapped into specific channels of cultural pride, and signified through the strategic triggering of historical narratives. Ron Rowell, Executive Director of the National Native American AIDS Prevention Center, states:

Our struggle is – as it has been for so long – a struggle for survival as a people. We are not being alarmist when we raise the potential of another demographic collapse due to AIDS and the disappearance of entire indigenous cultures. An epidemic which primarily affects those individuals in their most fecund years can destroy a tribe’s future. It has happened before in our history and it can happen again. However, we are tough, we are determined. *We will survive* the AIDS challenge. We have 30,000 years of experience in America to help us do so.<sup>36</sup>

Here AIDS is stitched into the fabric of colonisation (and the past epidemics undergirding colonial regimes), problematically encoded as a disease that threatens the sacrosanct procreative functions of tribal communities, the unquestioned desire for futurity. Yet the very rhetorical rootedness of Native Americans in U.S. soil bolsters their heightened (conceptual) immunity to the AIDS epidemic; as Rowell suggests, this demographic has the experience and the knowledge to overcome and flourish in North America. After 1981,

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<sup>35</sup> Susie Kilshaw, *Impotent Warriors: Gulf War Syndrome, Vulnerability and Masculinity* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), 120: emphasis added.

<sup>36</sup> Ron Rowell cited in Irene S. Vernon, *Killing Us Quietly: Native Americans and HIV/AIDS* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), cover page: emphasis added.

Gonzales and Rowell's emphatic declarations of survival also resonated in mainstream U.S. gay communities, memorialised in Gloria Gaynor's pre-AIDS camp dance-club anthem, "I Will Survive," appropriated as activist rallying cries, and adopted as personal mantras of endurance in the face of mass death.

As Rowell's words make clear the immune system is also celebrated as a mechanism that privileges, or at least unquestioningly shores up, heteronormativity. For Rowell, immunity explicitly memorialises the build up of resistance acquired through unending regimes of reproduction. In his discussion of Peruvian mestizaje Noble David Cook contends:

Part of the answer to the survival of some groups may lie in genetic mixture. A mestizo should inherit part of the immunity of the European parent [...] If the ability of the Indian to survive was due to racial mixture, then the process needs explanation. Using test mice, Sabin in 1952 discovered that resistance to yellow fever was inherited in Mendelian fashion. Human populations reproduce relatively slowly. Any type of biological immunity must take place over a long period.<sup>37</sup>

It is assumed that immunological health relies upon a rigid system of procreation. For Cook, corporeal protection from infection was passed down through the blood of the white, European colonising father to counter the dearth provided by the indigenous mother. Through a system of genetic transmission the immune system is galvanised. That immunity relies upon the continued persistence of procreation (the stabilising promise of generational kinship) bolsters the fusion of heterosexualised fecundity, racial admixture, and immune health. Whiteness becomes encoded as a shining beacon of strength and a progenitor of health. There is a suggestive slip in the construction of HIV/AIDS: immunity is inherited, what is acquired comes later.

As *el Movimiento* declined and a deadly blood-borne pathogen was isolated in laboratories, Chicana feminism exploded in the academy; in the 80s the call to advocate for Chicano/a interests in the U.S. conceptually shifted from the actions of (almost exclusively heterosexual) men to the voices of (predominantly non-heteronormative) women.<sup>38</sup> Despite this authorial oscillation, the bolstering of mixed-blood resilience did not wane. Rather the viral genocides that had accompanied the Spanish conquest of the Americas became further absorbed into the cohesive, ideological image of an enduring race energised by

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<sup>37</sup> Noble David Cook, *Demographic Collapse: Indian Peru, 1520-1620* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 72.

<sup>38</sup> I do not wish to reinscribe binaries which keep women positioned as inert and passive whilst men remain linked to action. Rather, the period of academic debate in the 1980s fundamentally differed from the activist actions of the previous generation.

genetic diversity. Mestizo/a populations spawned from the various unions of the conquistadors and the surviving indigenous Aztecs became latterly defined by their immunological resilience, by the corporeal protection their mixed heritage had equipped them with. In *Borderlands* Anzaldúa asserts, “the *mestizos* who were *genetically equipped* to survive small pox, measles, and typhus (Old world diseases to which the natives had no immunity) founded a new hybrid race, and inherited Central and South America.”<sup>39</sup> Later she argues that “like corn, the mestiza is a product of crossbreeding, designed for preservation under a variety of conditions.”<sup>40</sup> Anzaldúa adopts racial-admixture as part of a strategy of Chicano/a myth-making, equating immune strength with racial and cultural survival and positioning mestizo/as as a genetically modified species, bred for preservation. Here the immune system is transformed from an intimate cloak of protection to a politicised, historicised archive of collective resistance to colonisation, appropriated as a totem and a talisman.

As Anzaldúa’s comments suggest, since the time of the sixteenth century Spanish conquest, viruses have been perceived as crucial to the subjugation of Latino populations in the American Southwest. Indeed without the dissemination of infectious agents such as smallpox, measles, and influenza by the already immune Spanish conquistadors, the Aztec peoples may have retained their native territories. For immunobiologist Michael Oldstone, the physical and psychological trauma of widespread fatality (occurring without a discernible cause) provided the catalyst for not only the desecration of Mexican Aztec cultures, but for the insidious insertion (and assertion) of Catholicism. “The stricken Aztecs,” Oldstone proffers, “interpreted the death of their people while the Spaniards went untouched as a clear indication that the Christian god held dominance over native gods.”<sup>41</sup> The Catholic establishment may have been adversely punitive regarding HIV over the pandemics brief history, yet, as Oldstone corroborates, the very hegemony of Christianity in the West is foundered upon the unrestricted transference of viral matter.

‘The Blood was Fulfilled,’ an extract taken from the *Chilam Bayam of Chumayel*, a document collated in the seventeenth century by the indigenous Mayans and early mixed-blood people of the Yucatán, gives a unique account of the biological effects of the Spanish Conquest:

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<sup>39</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 27: emphasis added.

<sup>40</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 103.

<sup>41</sup> Michael B. A. Oldstone, *Viruses, Plagues, and History: Past, Present and Future* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 5.

Life was wholesome. There was no sickness then; there was no aching of the bones; there was no fever for them; there was no smallpox; there was no burning in the chest; there was no pain in the stomach; there was no consumption. Raised up straight was the body then. The foreigners made it otherwise after they came here. They brought shameful things when they came. Everything was lost in carnal sin. No more lucky days were granted us. This was the cause of our sickness.<sup>42</sup>

When compared to the AIDS epidemic occurring centuries later this statement is eerily prescient. The termination of a “wholesome” existence through diseases disseminated through “carnal sin” certainly resonates. However, the spread of illness imagined here is encoded as a consequence of invasion and colonisation. Viruses were uncontrollable within bodies or within territories; they darted ahead of the slowly advancing conquistadors and wiped out entire communities, conscripted as ignorant servants of colonial expansion. Importantly, this narrative of transmission is in itself limited and problematic; as Aurora Levins Morales asserts, such an inscription plays into the dominant construction of male conquerors furnished with deadly agency.<sup>43</sup> Histories of viral genocide resonated in the opening years of HIV/AIDS in America. Critics such as Sander Gilman drew parallels between AIDS and syphilis whilst one tropical disease expert in France even publically wondered whether the outbreak of a disease which raged through Europe after the voyages of Columbus, a disease seen to be contracted on the island of Hispaniola, had in fact been AIDS.<sup>44</sup> Chicano/a scholars and cultural producers also responded to this trajectory of illness in the West. In Julie Alvarez’s novel *Saving the World*, the protagonist Alma Rodríguez attempts to write a historical novel documenting the effects of smallpox in nineteenth century Puerto Rico whilst simultaneously struggling with her own fears over exposure to HIV.

In *The Last Generation*, a 1993 collection of poetry and prose, Cherrie Moraga makes a subtle, yet illuminating, grammatical choice. Describing the aftermath of the L.A. riots she declares:

It is 1992 and Los Angeles is on fire. Half a millennium after the arrival of Columbus, the Mesoamerican prophecies are being fulfilled. The enslaved have taken to the streets, burning down the conqueror’s golden cities. A decade-long

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<sup>42</sup> *The Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel* [1933], trans. Ralph L. Roys (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1967), 83.

<sup>43</sup> See Aurora Levins Morales, *Remedios: Stories of Earth and Iron from the History of Puertorriqueñas* [1998] (Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press, 2001). Levins Morales chooses to shift this authorial gaze from the male conquistadors to indigenous female healer, from illness to wellness.

<sup>44</sup> Sander L. Gilman, ‘AIDS and Syphilis: The Iconography of Disease,’ *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism*, 87-108; Mirko D. Grmek, *History of AIDS: Emergence and Origin of a Modern Pandemic*, trans. Russell C. Maulitz and Jacalyn Duffin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 111.

plague that attacks the very immune system upon which our survival depends assumes pandemic proportions.<sup>45</sup>

The very immune *system* upon which *our* survival depends, the singular nestling against the plural. Taken on its own Moraga's evocation of the immune system may be seen as a banal comment on the importance of the body's detection system (corporeal immigration control), positioned as a necessary structure for human survival. However, such a reading appears incongruous in the larger context of Moraga's anguish and outrage. At this time, could the synthesis of immune systems and mestiza/o history ever be extraneous? She grafts the narrative of HIV/AIDS in America onto the traumatic *collective* histories of colonial expansion and slavery; she points to HIV/AIDS as a product of history, functioning through dynamics of racial oppression and class inequality, and as another form of biological genocide wielded against indigenous communities. Here "survival" indexes both individual existence and the endurance of mestizo/a people. Similarly, if the immune system is imagined as a repository of a *shared* history, then HIV is theorised as a virus which is communal as well as communicable. With the advent of AIDS and the creation of non-profit organisations such as the People With AIDS Coalition and the Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC), and direct action groups like ACT UP, the immune system once again became a space of *collective* anxiety around which a vibrant social movement could pivot. As PWA Coalition president Larry Guttenberg asserted in 1991, "Our compromised immune system can't compromise our focal point."<sup>46</sup> Once again the plural and the singular became synthesised in the face of mass annihilation.

So what does it mean to be of mixed-blood, to be invested in these narratives of immunological vigour that have, I argue, been a rallying point for modern constructions of a glorified mestiza/o aesthetic, whilst simultaneously harbouring HIV inside your body, the epitomic iconoclast of immune efficacy? What happens when blood is situated as a site of history and of memory, only to become infected? In one of the closing scenes of Chilean playwright and Teatro Bravo founder Guillermo Reyes's 1994 one-man performance piece *Men on the Verge of a His-panic Breakdown* [Figure 14], actor Felix A. Pire enters as La Gitana, a young gay Latino man in a hospital gown attached to a drip, a soon to be made-up drag queen dying of AIDS. Facing the audience he declares: "La Gitana they call me, after the gypsy blood in me mixed with the Moorish Andalusian strains in my precious, delicate veins that have sustained generations of my kind – and we have survived and

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<sup>45</sup> Cherrie Moraga, 'Codex Xerí: El Momento Histórico,' *The Last Generation* (Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press, 1993), 185.

<sup>46</sup> Larry Guttenberg, 'Letter to the Editor,' *Newsline*, January/February 1991, 9.

thrived, and grown to be grand and splendid, and now.”<sup>47</sup> He trails off sadly. Beyond the morose silence, the sputtering ellipsis of an omitted future, lies La Gitana’s present reality; the hybrid blood residing in his body (familiar nomad Indio mingling with the Spanish strains, an anonymous sanguineous hook-up) is no longer just a seminal elixir galvanising generations of Latinos with a boisterous immunity but a substance saturated with suppression, incubating a virus which promises to kill its host, which threatens to terminate a legacy of mixed-blood resilience. This communal myth falters as it encounters its ultimate anatomical debunker.

However, Reyes’s depiction is just one reading of the interpenetration of HIV/AIDS and mestizaje as it relates to immunity. In 1992 Alejandro Morales wrote the intriguing novel, *The Rag Doll Plagues*. Divided into three books, the narrative opens in Mexico City in the last decades of colonial rule. Dr. Gregorio Revueltas, a medical envoy to the king of Spain, arrives to investigate a mysterious AIDS-like plague called “La Mona” – “the ragdoll” – which is decimating the populous. As the doctor battles to bring order and sanitation to the immoral and squalid metropolis, the plague steals away, creeping towards the U.S. border. Book Two hurtles the reader forward to the late twentieth century, where a Chicano doctor in Los Angeles (an oblique copy of the first, a distant ancestor with the same name) witnesses the initial devastation of the burgeoning AIDS epidemic. The effects of AIDS are likened to previous social and biological upheavals.

The final book imagines a future society in which Mexico, the United States, and Canada have been amalgamated, the borders imposed by European conquest rendered null-and-void. A third doctor is introduced whilst a third epidemic rages. But this time the doctor stumbles across a cure: the blood of borderland Mexicans, a seminal fluid furnished with the resilience of the Indian, the vigour of the European, and the admixture of both, immunological potency pumping through their veins. By injecting Mexican blood into afflicted bodies, the inhabitants north of the LAMEX corridor (the passage suturing Los Angeles to Mexico City) are delivered from the effects of the plague. This act of incorporation marks the re-territorialisation of Mexicans in North America through the mixing of blood:

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<sup>47</sup> Guillermo Reyes, *Men on the Verge of a His-panic Breakdown* [1994], performed at the 47<sup>th</sup> Street Theatre in New York City on July 4<sup>th</sup> 1997. This production was videotaped for The Theatre on Film and Tape Archive stored at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center. Accessed March 15<sup>th</sup> 2013.

In the past, it was Mexican Indian blood that was sacrificed to the sun forces; it was Mexican blood that was spilled during the conquest; it was Mexican blood that ran during the genocidal campaign of the Spanish Colonial period; it was Mexican blood that stained the bayonets during the war of Independence and the Mexican Revolution of 1910; it was Mexican blood that provided the cheap labor to California during the first half of the nineteenth century; it was Mexican blood that guaranteed a cure and prevention for lung disorders. In a matter of time Mexican blood would run in all the population of the LAMEX corridor. Mexican blood would gain control of the land it lost almost 250 years ago.<sup>48</sup>

However, this promise of a rejuvenated Mexican nation, which echoes Vasconcelos's utopian vision of a fully integrated interracial society, never comes to fruition. This scientific discovery only leads to further isolation and oppression. By the end of the novel, Anglo-America is seen to capitalise on the medicinal efficacy of Mexican blood as Mexicans become forced into indentured servitude to Anglo families. First Mexican blood is given as an altruistic gift; later it is bartered in economies of supply and demand. In Morales's novel, white bodies acquire health through their capacity to *purchase* immunity by securing a constant supply of restorative Mexican blood. Blood-mixing as a consequence of interracial sexual intercourse is prohibited; now it is only acceptable as a form of capitalist exchange.

Although Morales's novel depicts an imaginary future world, the practice of acquiring immunity is far from fictitious. In *Globalizing AIDS* (2002), Cindy Patton argues that notions of immunity were staunchly mired in the vicissitudes of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Third World colonisation. She contends that colonising factions acknowledged the natural immunity of indigenous populations (after the biological and racial hybridisation which colonialism had spawned) and soon aspired to attain and commodify this immunity. But this acquisition could not feasibly occur through admixture, for proximity to the native, the perceived contamination of European blood via sexual contact, was reviled and rendered unthinkable. Rather, synthetic immunity became valorised, and regimens of immunisation were developed to enable the safe occupation of territories:

The fantasy of acquiring immunity – of having the natives' immunity, even their blood, enter one's body – might have feminized the colonist. Achieving immunity might have erased the difference that susceptibility to disease marked. But tropical thinking was confident of its implicit geographical scheme, in which the First World is always superior to the Third World. The quest for immunity sustained the

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<sup>48</sup> Alejandro Morales, *The Rag Doll Plagues* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1992), 195.



hierarchical difference between the colonized, immune body and the colonizing, immunizable body.<sup>49</sup>

Clearly, fantasies of innate immunity were not merely being circulated by proponents of mestizo resilience. Such rhetoric also facilitated the glorification of white colonising factions, for although they lacked the immunity which the native already possessed they had the knowledge, the technology, and the wealth to *acquire* immunity. Now they could protect their bodies whilst maintaining the rigid corporeal and metaphorical boundaries (boundaries ensuring masculine-aligned impenetrability) separating them from their colonial charges. *Being* immune was equated with primitivism; *becoming* immune was conflated with civilisation.

The safeguarding of immunity through action and separation also became central to early narratives of HIV exposure in North America. Certainly some AIDS-phobic factions spewed rhetoric of the inherent immunity of those communities removed from “corrupt individuals” engaging in “high risk” behaviour. The initial labelling of the disease as GRID in 1982 and the dilution and containment of risk into rigid, stigmatised “4-H” groups, cemented the illusion that those outside of these categories – the ubiquitous “general public” – had secured immunity to AIDS through their morally-upright identities and their low-risk conduct. Following the infamous death of actor Rock Hudson from AIDS-related complications in 1985, *Life* magazine published an article declaring ‘Now No One Is Safe from AIDS.’<sup>50</sup> This alarmist statement shows that before this moment it had been possible for the majority of people to believe that they were immune to the effects of HIV/AIDS. Similarly, in 1986 CBS’s ‘Sixty Minutes’ hosted by Dan Rather did a special entitled ‘AIDS hits home;’ such a pronouncement was particularly grievous for the swaths of Americans who had been struggling with HIV/AIDS for the past five years. Obviously CBS’s notion of home centred on the lives of white, middle class heterosexuals. In the wake of Hudson’s death, cultural production representing the epidemic became increasingly bifurcated. Richard Goldstein argues that whilst the arts tended to focus on the person with AIDS, the mass cultural response preferred to look at the family, friends, and general public surrounding the person with AIDS; whilst “one represent[ed] the implicated, the other the immune.”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Cindy Patton, *Globalizing AIDS* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 36.

<sup>50</sup> Edward Barnes and Amy Hollister, ‘Now No One Is Safe from AIDS,’ *Life* (July 1985).

<sup>51</sup> Richard Goldstein, ‘The Implicated and the Immune: Responses to AIDS in the Arts and Popular Culture,’ *A Disease of Society: Cultural and Institutional Responses to AIDS*, ed. Dorothy Nelkin, David P. Willis, and Scott V. Parris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 22.

## Aztecs with AIDS

Following on from this discussion, Joey Terrill's vibrant painting, *My Patron Saint Praying for My Immune System* (1993), depicts a glitter-adorned, brown-skinned man clasping his hands in prayer (maybe even despair), his head encased by a golden halo of light. A broom is propped beside him. Tucked away in the bottom left-hand corner of the painting is the image of a man, presumably Terrill himself, reposed in sleep, 'zs' emanating from his mouth [Figure 15]. Through this staging of religious devotion, the immune system displaces "the soul" as the proper beneficiary of prayer. If the soul is the metaphorical, cerebral, incorporeal breath of life which animates the ahistorical religious subject then the immune system stands as its dubious counterpart: a scientific, embodied if ephemeral, spark of life which animates the modern biopolitical subject. Terrill brings religious iconography to bear on a social construct codified in the mid-twentieth century.

However, Terrill's painting also encodes Aztec mythology. I contend that the broom symbolises the praying man's desire for purification, a desire to rid his body of the virus attacking his precious immune system. The broom is a significant object, wielded on the feast day of Ochpaniztli, an event in the Aztec religious calendar, where slaves and merchants would take to the streets of Tenochtitlan, the Aztec capital city, with brooms in order to cleanse the city of filth. Furthermore, the feast of Ochpaniztli was dedicated to the Aztec deity, Tlazolteotl, a goddess of purification, fertility, vice, sexual misdeeds, the death caused by lust, and disease. In traditional images and sculpture her mouth is stained black with bitumen, a viscous by-product of decomposed material, rendering her the metaphorical (teetering on the edge of the literal) "Eater of Excrement." In Aztec society, Cecelia Klein states, "promiscuous women [...] as well as sodomites – were typically characterized in terms of bodily waste. Their carnal vices were all referred to as *tlaello* or *tlazolli*, meaning filth, garbage, refuse, or ordure."<sup>52</sup> A ghoulish image, filth and other bodily waste nevertheless imbibed a plethora of meanings in Aztec culture, linked to sexual licentiousness and sin, but also positioned as essential commodities collected by the state.<sup>53</sup> The filth associated with Tlazolteotl, therefore, "represented not just transgressions of Aztec sexual code but also the means of offsetting them, for transforming or converting them into something healthy and fertile."<sup>54</sup> She is presented as a benevolent deity,

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<sup>52</sup> Cecelia F. Klein, 'Teocuitlatl, "Divine Excrement": The Significance of Holy Shit' in Ancient Mexico,' *Art Journal*, vol. 52, no. 3, Scatological Art (Autumn 1993), 21.

<sup>53</sup> Faeces was used in the production of fertilizer and salt, whilst urine was procured as a mordant for dyeing. See Klein, 'Teocuitlatl,' 21-22.

<sup>54</sup> Klein, 'Teocuitlatl,' 22.

forgiving the sexual excesses she provoked and embodied, “she heard all confessions, she removed corruption”;<sup>55</sup> indeed it was believed that confessing one’s sexual misdeeds to her could even ward off certain death. Filth and sin were thus represented as the cause of decline *and* as the means to prevent it.

It is easy to ascertain why such a deity would have resonated with Terrill, who as well as self-identifying as gay and Chicano, was (and continues to be) heavily involved in HIV/AIDS advocacy and activism in Los Angeles; indeed much of his work documents his negotiations of HIV and HIV medications. In *My Patron Saint Praying for My Immune System*, he weaves ancient Aztec iconography into narratives of gay desire in the age of AIDS. Tlazolteotl is an obliquely encoded, double-edged referent, a cause of his illness and a means of finding release. Furthermore, as a goddess known for a sexual licentiousness that is both degenerative and regenerative she wonderfully encapsulates the queer commitment to developing sex-positive, community-led HIV-prevention. As Crimp famously declared in the late 80s, “they insist our promiscuity will destroy us when in fact *it is our promiscuity that will save us.*”<sup>56</sup>

As well as deploying religious and Aztec iconography in his artwork, Terrill was also deeply drawn to the artistic and innovative elements of the *cholo* and “homeboy” culture that flourished in Los Angeles. Fascinated by the Latino gangs he encountered in Highland Park – the Cypress Park Boys, The Avenues, Frog Town – yet disgusted by what he perceived to be the violent and misogynistic elements of this subculture, in 1978 he created and distributed the queer Chicano zine *Homeboy Beautiful* [Figure 16].<sup>57</sup> Parodying periodicals such as *House Beautiful*, he nevertheless drew inspiration from a group of feminists who in March 1970 took over the New York offices of *Ladies’ Home Journal* to demand that women be represented in the production of the magazine. *Homeboy Beautiful* repudiated the most pernicious aspects of Chicano culture and encouraged gay Chicano men to mobilise in the pre-AIDS moment. A decade later in 1989 he illustrated two volumes of *Chicos Modernos*, a free Spanish-language AIDS educational comic book targeted at Latino MSM, distributed along with condoms at Latino gay bars throughout California [Figure 17].

In 1994 Terrill was commissioned to produce a calendar for VIVA, the first gay and lesbian Latino/a arts organisation, based in Los Angeles: “based on the concept of the

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<sup>55</sup> Bernardino de Sahagún, *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of Spain*, trans. Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble, thirteen volumes (Sante Fe: School of American Research and University of Utah, 1950-82), vol. 1, 23-24.

<sup>56</sup> Douglas Crimp, ‘How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic’ [1987], *Melancholia and Moralism*, 63.

<sup>57</sup> Richard T. Rodríguez, ‘Being and Belonging: Joey Terrill’s Performance of Politics,’ *Biography* 34: 3 (Summer 2011), 467-491, 478.

calendarios which are given out by Mexican bakeries, carnicerías, markets and restaurants VIVA wanted an image that was culturally a synthesis of both our Latino/Mexican heritage and our identity as queer/gay.”<sup>58</sup> With this in mind he created *La Historia de Amor*. As the title suggests, this calendar sought to situate the affective networks forged by gay men throughout the unfolding of the epidemic as an extension of a specifically Latino/a cultural history. Terrill utilised an image which already had considerable currency in Chicano/a communities, an image taken from Aztec folklore of Popocatepetl (Popo), an Aztec warrior, and Ixtachihuatl (Ixta), the daughter of an Aztec emperor. To prove himself worthy of her love, Popo goes to war; Ixta, believing he has been killed in battle, takes her own life. When he learns of her death, inconsolable with grief, Popo carries Ixta’s body to the top of the highest mountain, hoping the snow will revive her. There he stayed, mourning for his lost love. Upon his death their bodies are said to have been transformed into two volcanoes.<sup>59</sup>

Terrill doctors the legend. Popo, strong and regal, reclines atop a snow covered mountain, his muscular chest bare, his head adorned with a traditional Aztec feather headdress. In his arms he cradles not the princess Ixta but a beautiful young man with closed eyes; whether he is dead or merely sleeping is not made clear. Beneath the image a simple declaration is penned: “Apoya tus hermanos con VIH, Support your brothers with HIV” [Figure 18]. For Catrióna Rueda Esquibel, Aztec myth becomes interpellated as a queer antecedent, ancient Aztec iconography shaping modern interpretations of the male form in artistic production. “Terrill’s work draws attention to the ‘drag queen’ qualities of the Aztec warrior,” she states, “as well as the ways in which an overemphasis on the masculine body resonates with contemporary gay male representations.”<sup>60</sup> Esquibel’s reading seems too simplistic. She does not intuit that the hyper-masculinisation of the Aztec warrior may not merely position the male form as a fetishised commodity percolating in gay culture; indeed *el Movimiento* often glorified the Aztec warrior as a perfect male archetype, utilising this to exclude women and homosexuals in this period. After AIDS, several gay Chicano artists played on this, refiguring the muscular, masculine indigenous body as a paragon of health, endurance, and virility that had nevertheless all but disappeared from modern society (often as a result of deadly diseases and violence).<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> See [www.joeyterrillartist.com/chicanismo](http://www.joeyterrillartist.com/chicanismo). Accessed 14th February 2014.

<sup>59</sup> Arrizón, *Queering Mestizaje*, 172.

<sup>60</sup> Catrióna Rueda Esquibel, *With Her Machete in Her Hand: Reading Chicana Lesbians* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 54.

<sup>61</sup> See Teddy Sandoval’s painting *Macho Mayan* (1993). Sandoval was a painter and one of the main collaborators of Asco. He is perhaps best known for creating the Butch Gardens School of Fine Art in Silver Lake, Los Angeles, a popular gathering place for gay artists in the early 80s.

However, appropriating the legend of Ixta and Popo to comment on the experiences of gay men in 1990s L.A. is problematic. Firstly, the notion of the dying, prostrate female plays into rhetoric of a stratified economy of desire and risk in gay culture; here it is the feminised vessel, the penetrated bottom, that is vulnerable to death. That Ixta committed suicide also positions an entire generation of gay men as pathologically hedonistic, bent on their own eventual annihilation. On the other hand, Terrill's choice to tell the current story of AIDS through icons from a collective Chicano/a heritage also suggests that the homosexual pairing depicted here has historical significance, and that the homosociality of men, which always promises the fostering of homoeroticism, has functioned in the past to construct strong ties of affect in the present, ties which have structured the eventual emergence of a self-determined, politically astute Chicano/a community in the Southwest. Although Terrill's painting is exclusive, signifying through the occlusion of non-gay, non-male experiences of the epidemic, it should not necessarily be read as exclusionary; at this time, to highlight the presence of same-sex desire outside of white communities constituted a radical departure from official narratives of the epidemic. To insert the Aztec into the narrative of AIDS in America is a risk; it risks positioning indigenous populations as morally degenerate and immunologically deficient. But, as Terrill hints, to remember the distant past within the vicissitudes of a jarring present works to corrode pockets of cultural amnesia pervading all aspects of American society; here even the "proper" story of the early years of the U.S. AIDS epidemic has been re-scripted.

As I have argued throughout this thesis, gay Latino cultural producers have utilised the virus to explore the interactions of white and brown bodies in America. Viewing the virus as matter acquired from white culture also appears in Alberto Antonio "Beto" Araiza (a key member of Teatro VIVA) and Paul Bonin-Rodriguez's play *Quinceañera*. *Quinceañera*, developed by the New WORLD Theater in 1998, charts the first fifteen years of the U.S. AIDS crisis from a queer Latino perspective by reappropriating a traditional Latina rite-of-passage, the 'fiesta de quinceañera' ceremony marking the fifteen year old Latina's progression from childhood to womanhood, from innocence to experience. In the lifecycle of HIV/AIDS in America the quinceañera celebrated is the emergence of combination therapy in 1996, fifteen years after the first cases of AIDS surfaced. Dubbed a "Latino queer and transcultural party for AIDS,"<sup>62</sup> *Quinceañera* is a hodgepodge of hilarious and poignant skits, which comically lambast the audience, as inert

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<sup>62</sup> Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez, 'Quinceañera: A Latino Queer and Transcultural Party for AIDS,' *The Color of Theater: Race, Culture and Contemporary Performance*, ed. Roberta Uno and Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns (London and New York: Continuum, 2002), 303.

witnesses to the unfolding narrative of AIDS, by drawing them into the action. The actors flout convention, erratically shifting from inhabiting the role of fictional (and historical) characters to speaking directly to the audience as themselves; they urge the crowd to call out the names of their loved ones who have died from AIDS, they invite them to join the party, to dance upon the stage. They hurtle through a transforming parade of fast-paced scenarios, from fifteen year old Verónica searching for an escort to accompany her to her quinceañera (only to discover that all the suitable young men have died of AIDS), to the outlandish Miss AZT-LAND pageant, in which Araiza, Bonin-Rodriguez, and Danny Zaldivar take to the stage to tell the audience what they have brought to the history of AIDS, all hoping to “get it” (“Not the virus! The crown!”).<sup>63</sup>

The quinceañera – as a temporal marker and a form of memorialisation – has resonated, adapted to encompass Latino experiences of the AIDS epidemic. In a blog entry written for *POZ* magazine, commemorating fifteen years of The Austin Latino/Latina LGBT Organisation (ALLGO), Joe Jimenez writes:

this is our task, I believe -- to journey to the past in order to survive the future, to resurrect the ancient in order to recreate the modern. We are here to breathe those beautiful moments when we meet in the world of survival and shared history. It's about embracing the living, the dead, and the effort to regenerate ourselves. It's desire, papa -- to live and survive pleasurably, *con ganas*, to be one of the biggest, baddest, fiercest *jotas* Aztlán has ever seen, and to never, never forget.<sup>64</sup>

Like Araiza and Bonin-Rodriguez, Jimenez approaches AIDS as part of a larger story, plotted onto an unstable narrative stretching into the past and extending into the future. To view AIDS as an implosion of cultural memory is problematic for these queer Chicanos; the ritualistic memorialisation of fifteen years of AIDS *as* a quinceañera not only operates as a necessary marker of otherwise ephemeral memory, it commemorates a collective struggle deriving from a *shared* history. By invoking the mythical land of Aztlán, Jimenez weaves his experiences of HIV/AIDS into the historical, political, and cultural icons that dictate his ethnic purview; he likens the cultural amnesia of his young gay male peer group, those who have come to queer consciousness after the introduction of life-saving and life-extending antiretroviral therapies – “My urgency to know comes not from seeing my friends and lovers and tricks die off” – to the struggle for Chicanos to remember the places, spaces, and narratives which have been systematically devalued and erased by

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<sup>63</sup> Alberto Antonio Araiza, Paul Bonin-Rodriguez, Michael Martinez, and Danny Bolero Zaldivar, ‘Quinceañera,’ *The Color of Theater*, 261-301, 271.

<sup>64</sup> Joe Jimenez, “La Quinceañera de Allgo,” *POZ*, November 2000. [http://www.poz.com/articles/207\\_1416](http://www.poz.com/articles/207_1416). Accessed 14<sup>th</sup> February 2014.

Anglo-America. Both Aztlán and AIDS are slippery signifiers (without referents), invested in a shifting landscape of displacements in which meaning is never fixed, but rather disseminates through networks of signification and association. Both concepts remain fundamentally untenable and infinitely absent. Queer Chicanos, Jimenez entreates, must look to the past in order to construct a liveable future.

I wish to consider a particular scene that takes place halfway through *Quinceañera*, a scene entitled ‘The Jaguar Lounge.’ As techno music blasts two figures enter: Hernán Cortés and Doña Marina (a.k.a. La Malinche), the Spanish conquistador and the Nahua interpreter, the legendary parents of the imminent mestizo race. Acting as guide, Doña Marina leads Cortés into the pulsating Jaguar Lounge, “the hottest night-stop in all Tenochtitlan!”<sup>65</sup> Although Cortés uncomfortably notes the surfeit of men (“I figured you’re European, so you wouldn’t mind,” Doña Marina quips<sup>66</sup>) his eyes nevertheless alight with interest on one man: Moctezuma, emperor of Tenochtitlan. Instantly attracted, they proceed to talk, dance, and exit into the night. As Cortés kneels to give Moctezuma a blowjob (“I see what I want and I take it”<sup>67</sup>) he extracts from his pocket a golden coin which he proceeds to unwrap: his currency is revealed to be a condom. Immediately perplexed by this foreign object Moctezuma turns to Doña Marina, the translator of cultures, ignoring the lascivious advances of the European coloniser:

DOÑA MARINA: It’s a condom. (*More emphatic*) Un condón. (*MOCTEZUMA doesn’t get it*) There’s no náhuatl equivalent...It’s a sheath for your temple!...keeps the blood separate from the sacrifice, so to speak.

CORTÉS: I could say, ‘Hey, I’m a hot top daddy looking to occupy your foreign soil. Something like that...’

MOCTEZUMA: ‘Keeps the blood separate.’ Ridiculous! What’s the point then? The blood is the sacrifice!

DOÑA MARINA: Pero, you don’t know who he’s been with!

CORTÉS: (*interjecting*) You could say that ‘discover me’ part again...I liked that.

MOCTEZUMA: And he doesn’t know who I’ve been with!

DOÑA MARINA: I don’t think you’ve been in as many ports of call – he’s been places.

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<sup>65</sup> Araiza et al, ‘Quinceañera,’ 281. I preserve the writer’s spelling of “Tenochtitlan” here; in most accounts it appears as Tenochtitlan.

<sup>66</sup> Araiza et al, ‘Quinceañera,’ 281.

<sup>67</sup> Araiza et al, ‘Quinceañera,’ 283.

MOCTEZUMA: I've conquered nations!

CORTÉS: (*hugging MOCTEZUMA from behind*) I could sail my ship into your canals, colonize your tight little ports.

DOÑA MARINA: Look Mo', even though you've totally disregarded me as a person and a woman, cut down my people, I am going to give you a little gift of survival in the new world.

CORTÉS: (*seductively*) It's a really big ship.

(*MOCTEZUMA now gives CORTÉS his full attention*)

DOÑA MARINA: The first rule of any negotiation is that you take care of yourself.

MOCTEZUMA: I am thinking of myself – can't you see, the world revolves around my needs. (*pulling CORTÉS closer in, behind him*)

DOÑA MARINA: I'm not being heard here.

CORTÉS and MOCTEZUMA: Cállate, woman!

CORTÉS: There's no room for you here.

DOÑA MARINA: Fine! I'll go, but learn from my example. And watch who you call Malinche! And when you start looking for a scapegoat, and you will, don't come looking for me.

(*CORTÉS and MOCTEZUMA watch DOÑA MARINA exit*)

CORTÉS: Let me show you what I mean by God.<sup>68</sup>

This scene re-imagines the 1519 meeting between Moctezuma II and Hernán Cortés, the inaugural contact between two men and two nations. Initially cordial and courteous the men exchanged gifts of gold and silver; but soon after, Moctezuma was imprisoned by the Spanish troops and eventually died.<sup>69</sup> Although briefly expelled from Tenochtitlan by Aztec forces in 'El Noche Triste' (The Sad Night or Night of Sorrows), Cortés and the conquistadors returned in 1521; this meeting ensured the decimation of the indigenous population, for the Europeans carried in their arsenal a conglomeration of deadly viruses. The New WORLD Theater group transports this historical meeting – with its promise of viral decimation – to the late twentieth century, to the glamour and the anonymity of the gay clubbing scene. As Doña Marina fears, this meeting results in the spread of disease.

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<sup>68</sup> Araiza et al, 'Quinceañera,' 284-285.

<sup>69</sup> This meeting is chronicled by Bernal Díaz del Castillo (1498-1585), a Spanish conquistador who participated in the conquest of Mexico alongside Hernán Cortés. See Díaz del Castillo, *The History of the Conquest of New Spain*, ed. David Carrasco (Albuquerque: The University of New Mexico Press, 2008).



On first reflection this skit seems geared to criticise certain aspects of gay male (predominantly white) culture, to lampoon the rife promiscuity of gay clubs and the abandonment of safe-sex practices by arrogant, dismissive young men. But I contend that such a reading fails to account for the radical (op)positionality of the writers, all of whom identify as queer, politicised Chicanos. This scene is powerful because it refuses to make facile judgements or commit to unambiguous moral platitudes. The action comments on the changed landscape of post-AIDS gay culture, the “new world” of homosexual relations. The analogies are layered and complex. On the surface the imminent threat of contagion is portrayed as emanating from the base desires of gay men; certainly the actions that take place in the gay club are presented as having monumental consequences, likened to the destruction of an entire civilisation. As Doña Marina hints, Cortés is about to give Moctezuma a gift; but the “gift” up for grabs in post-AIDS gay culture is not gold or silver but a virus. Here the writers see HIV/AIDS as an echo of an earlier viral genocide, the biological warfare which nearly wiped out the entire Aztec race.

But the figures of Moctezuma and Cortés do not merely index queer relations. They stand as embodied testaments to the pernicious violations promulgated by those endowed with power and authority, with unmandated privilege and entitlement. Their actions (and inactions) herald the implosion of the Aztec civilisation *and* the escalation of the AIDS crisis. AIDS is seen to spring from a historical legacy of colonialism and oppression; the gay club is merely a screen which diverts attention and obscures this truth. AIDS cannot be separated from these earlier actions because it functions through the same economies of injustice and greed which have allowed for the continued oppression of Chicano/as in the American Southwest.

Homosexuality is not awarded a complete reprieve from this searing critique. Desire between men is positioned here as patriarchy; the two men form an exclusive network of relations which banishes the figure of Doña Marina to the margins. Araiza and Bonin-Rodriguez divert from dominant narratives of the conquest. Cortés is no longer positioned as a rapist, a voracious exploiter of Aztec lands, and the progenitor of an illegitimate mestizo race; he now stands in collusion with Moctezuma, their desire for pleasure and power presaging the fall of an empire. In turn, Doña Marina is transformed from a symbol of weak and traitorous Mexican womanhood to a savvy and insightful translator, the “paradigmatic figure of Chicana feminism.”<sup>70</sup> Indeed the positive portrayal

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<sup>70</sup> See Norma Alarcón, ‘Traddutora, Traditora: A Paradigmatic Figure of Chicana Feminism,’ *Cultural Critique*, 13 (1989), 57-97.

Cherríe Moraga argues that images of Mexican-American women as Madonna-whores (the Virgen de Guadalupe perched on one end of the spectrum, La Malinche banished to the opposite end) were

of Doña Marina/La Malinche was a pressing agenda for Chicana feminists in the 80s. Araiza and Bonin-Rodriguez take up this call to resituate women in Chicano/a history; certainly the disavowal of Doña Marina is presented as a catalyst for the imminent devastation. They suggest that any society which functions through the rejection of otherness, be it a homogenous nation based around race and religion, or a homosexual subculture solidified around the desire of men, will ultimately fail to adequately support those factions who straddle a plethora of identities. By positioning Doña Marina as the moral centre of this scene, Araiza et al align themselves with the generation of radical Chicana feminists who liberated La Malinche.

### **Jinxing the Jetters**

As *el Movimiento* gathered pace in the Southwest, a group of young, political Chicano/as were making art (and waves) in the barrios of East L.A. At the beginning of the 1970s, high school friends Harry Gamboa Jr., Willie Herrón, Patti Valdez, and Gronk formed the avant-garde art collective Asco, melding performance, cinematography, photography, punk aesthetics, and social protest to comment on the abhorrent condition of education in the East L.A. school system and the place of Chicano youth in the American nation. Memorialisation was a key aesthetic strategy adopted by the group, memorialisation that rubbed against the grain of both societal racism and institutional discrimination and diverted from romanticised representations of Chicano/a folklore and *el Movimiento* itself. They flamboyantly wrested authority from those rituals, institutions, and narratives endowed with privilege and non-consensual mandates to preserve the stories of the synthetically homogenised L.A. community. Although not all of the members identified with a queer or even homosexual identity (indeed only Gronk was openly gay) they all subscribed to creeds of sexual liberation and explored the construction of gender, sexual, racial, and ethnic identities throughout their careers.<sup>71</sup>

The majority of their performances documented this struggle to assert and insert their vision, their community, and themselves, into the increasingly fractured topography of East L.A. In 1971 they appropriated the congested intersection of Whittier Boulevard to

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ubiquitous in the Chicano Movement, utilised to shame women into political and sexual passivity. See Moraga, 'Queer Aztlán: The Re-Formation of Chicano Tribe,' *The Last Generation*.

<sup>71</sup> Rudi Bleys states: "Never did any of the group's statements contain an explicit reproach of homophobia, nor did any of its members ever proclaim themselves to be gay. It was indirectly and in a 'carnavalesque' way only that [Asco] included coded messages about sexual identity in their improvisational performance style." See Bleys, *Images of Ambiente*, 173. However Max Benavidez writes: "Gronk says he knew from a young age that he was gay. As far as his work is concerned, his homosexuality has had a nuanced manifestation." See Benavidez, *Gronk*, 7.

perform their stylised version of the seminal Catholic installation, the Stations of the Cross [Figure 19]. Whittier Boulevard, the concrete artery of East L.A., held great significance for the collective. On August 29<sup>th</sup> 1970 a rally, later dubbed The National Chicano Moratorium, was organised by a coalition of Chicano activists to protest the decimation of their community in the U.S. conflict with Vietnam. The peaceful rally descended into chaos as the local police used force, tear gas, and disputed reports of robberies and other illegal activities to overcome the crowd, resulting in the death of four protestors. Rubén Salazar, a columnist for the *Los Angeles Times* was amongst the dead. In an act of commemoration, Asco dressed-up in elaborate costumes and full make-up and, to the bemusement of the gathering crowd, proceeded to drag a colossal cardboard crucifix down the intersection, planting it in front of a local U.S. Marine recruitment station. This artistic expression and act of civil disobedience – for the cross was used to block the entrance of the station – branded the “station” as a site of suffering (marked with a cross), and as a representation of an inevitable journey towards death; through the memorialisation of Christ’s sacrifice, a touchstone of the Catholic doctrine that saturated barrio consciousness, Asco defiantly protested the disproportionate number of Chicano deaths in the raging war.

As Asco began to fracture in the early 1980s, and as HIV/AIDS swept through East L.A., the practice of remembering and memorialising became even more pressing for the collective’s members. Written by Gamboa Jr. for the Los Angeles Theatre Center located in Downtown L.A., and first performed by Gronk and occasional Asco member Humberto Sandoval on October 3<sup>rd</sup> 1985, *Jetter’s Jinx* opens on Jetter, a suicidal middle-aged Chicano man of indiscriminate sexuality, waiting for guests to arrive for his birthday party [Figure 20]. With the exception of Nopal (“No-pal,” a dig at Jetter’s loneliness)<sup>72</sup> nobody will attend, for as the audience will soon discover, all of Jetter’s friends have died, or are dying, of AIDS.

The name Jetter had deep personal significance for Gamboa Jr. In March 1968 Chicano/a students at five separate high schools throughout Los Angeles staged a mass walkout to protest against what they perceived to be a discriminatory school system. Gamboa Jr., who was at this time a student at James A. Garfield High School, was a main instigator of the action, latter known as the East L.A. “blowouts.”<sup>73</sup> “The high school gained mounting notoriety as the trendsetter of Chicano fashion, etiquette, violence, and slang,” he recalls, “The competing adaptations of aesthetic standards, codes of loyalty, and

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<sup>72</sup> Nopal also translates as “cactus” in Spanish. This may be a tongue-in-cheek reference to Nopal’s prickly and abrasive characterisation.

<sup>73</sup> See Mario T. García and Sal Castro, *Blowout! Sal Castro and the Chicano Struggle for Educational Justice* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

levels of assimilation were popularized by the highly visible car clubs and gangs. However, the majority of students were unaffiliated youth.”<sup>74</sup> One such group of unaffiliated youth were the Jetters, a group containing the members who would imminently form Asco. In *Ismania* (1987), a play written by Gamboa Jr. and performed by Gronk, the protagonist Ismaniac outlines the cultural significance of the Jetters:

During the late sixties and early seventies there emerged a style-conscious group of Chicano youth known throughout East L.A. as Jetters. Jetters loved to party. Their parties took place wherever they went: the streets, parked cars, backyards, houses, alleys, and parking lots. They partied as a means to deny/defy the harsh realities which confronted them. All you needed was a quick wit, a sharp tongue, a cool dance step, attitude, the latest clothes, and enough cologne so that you'd smell good from a block away. They thrived in their own isolation. They were disliked by some for being too Mexican and disliked by others for not being Mexican enough. The Jetters assumed that they would die sooner than later and acted on impulse, driving their lives on erratically exploding emotions. Everyone and everything was always hot. They were all beautiful or at least appeared to themselves as beautiful. Then the dream started to shatter: broken hearts, cracked skulls, DOAs, killed in action, lifeless bodies, along with all the economic letdowns which accompany academic failure. Some Jetters partied until they were yellow in the liver or white in the vein.<sup>75</sup>

Fast forward to 1985, to a community embroiled in the devastating effects of high HIV transmission rates, bitter gang violence, and debilitating poverty. The defiance is still there, the quips, the attitude. But the party has been transformed, and the excess imbued with a deathly significance. For Asco, the political impetus behind the Jetters' party culture and their desire to isolate themselves from the mainstream was altered by the AIDS crisis; isolation no longer constituted a self-conscious rejection but recorded an enforced loss. The decadence of the 60s and 70s reverberated in the 80s; the attitudes, the fashion, and the hedonism had left livers bloated with jaundice and veins pumping “white” blood through Chicano bodies. The Jetters were represented as imbibing to the point of sickness or deracination; whether through cultural assimilation with Caucasian L.A. society, miscegenation or through the effects of substance abuse is unclear. As the title *Jetter's Jinx* suggests the effects of HIV/AIDS on these young communities of colour blighted modes of self-reflexive representation and enacted a scourge on the subcultural solidarity and vibrancy of the alternative affective networks that had thrived mere decades before.

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<sup>74</sup> Harry Gamboa Jr., ‘In the City of Angels, Chameleons, and Phantoms: Asco, a Case Study of Chicano Art in Urban Tones (or Asco Was a Four-Member Word,’ *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation 1965-1985* (Wright Art Gallery, UCLA, 1991), 122.

<sup>75</sup> Harry Gamboa Jr., ‘Ismania’ [1987], in *Urban Exile: Collected Writings of Harry Gamboa Jr.*, ed. Chon A. Noriega (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 252-267, 258-9.

By choosing to name the performance *Jetter's Jinx*, Gamboa Jr. refracts the present epidemic through a very specific Chicano/a historical narrative. *Jetter's Jinx* represents a desire to revive the past in the present, the actions of the former Jetters fictionalised to facilitate the reintroduction of Asco's creative brand of memorialisation. *Jetter's* is an esoteric verbal melee, a surreal cacophony of puns, innuendo, and code-switching that erratically catapults the characters through a wide spectrum of emotions, touching upon the sticky intersectionality of oppression(s) in the West. Adopting an "extravagance of dress and manner [to serve] as a placard for social impotence,"<sup>76</sup> akin to the stylised inactivity of Samuel Beckett's mid-twentieth century tragicomedy *Waiting for Godot*, *Jetter's* situates this inertia in the barrios of East L.A. The (in)action tracks the noxious curdling of history, constructing a historical and cultural purgatory stretching from the victimisation of Chicano/as in the late 60s to the avalanche of AIDS related deaths in the early 80s. It foregrounds a communal history; it drips with memory. Beckett's canonical foray into the aesthetics of paralysis haunts *Jetter's* with a searing poignancy, for whilst the two protagonists of the former, Vladimir and Estragon, linger endlessly for the arrival of *one* absent being (the infamous Godot), Jetter and Nopal wait hopelessly for an *entire generation* of departed men, women, and children: "The fact that my guest list of family, friends, accomplices, companions, comrades, cohorts, escorts, rivals, those in essence who make up my past are not present, does not upset me, it erases me."<sup>77</sup> For Jetter, AIDS eradicates a past that constitutes his memory and by extension his very identity. The ephemerality and inactivity captured in this performance piece encodes a racialised dynamic rooted in social exclusion and violence whilst indexing a state of sexual marginalisation, in which diseases are allowed to decimate communities before the very eyes of the watching, helpless audience. Gamboa Jr's stage directions are highly suggestive; each audience member is provided with a party hat which they will wear throughout the performance. They constitute Jetter's missing guests, taking the position of those who have contracted HIV/AIDS.

The idiosyncratic verbal play zinging between Jetter and Nopal is wonderfully encapsulated at one point in the performance in a sardonic game of charades. Interpreting Nopal's outlandish mimes, Jetter arrives at an answer, the culmination of the farce: "Many festivals destroy tiny successes." It continues:

*NOPAL manipulates JETTER'S mouth.*

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<sup>76</sup> Harry Gamboa Jr., *Jetter's Jinx* Playbill (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Theatre Center, 1985).

<sup>77</sup> Harry Gamboa Jr., 'Jetter's Jinx' [1985], *Urban Exile*, 224-240, 229.

Many fest, destroy tiny successes.  
Many fest, Dest, Tiny, suck, excess  
Mani, Fest, Des, Tiny, Suck excess.  
Manifest Destiny Sucks.

NOPAL: Won your freedom or lost your conscience?

JETTER: Charades, shmarades, parades. Why not play a real game like musical chairs with faulty electrical cords.

NOPAL: I'd prefer to play pin-the-blame-on-the-alien. It's a two-party tradition.<sup>78</sup>

The manipulation of language darkly degenerates into a barbed critique of U.S. society. This parody of that most innocent of pastimes (a spirited game of charades) belies a sinister doctrine of U.S. expansion throughout the Americas and the usurpation of indigenous lands by white settlers. From the ruinous effects of multiple festivities to a concentrated screed on American imperialism, the flamboyant action is unmasked to reveal a kernel of bitterness embedded in Jetter's (or rather the Jetters') emphasis on hedonism, political vigour obscured behind the flashy focus on fun and fashion. From the roots of a Chicano-esque preoccupation with celebration, a political consciousness is bubbling to the surface, clarifying with every semantic evolution and every generation. Gamboa Jr. asks his audience to make a distinction between the behaviour of the Jetters (as engineered farce) and the ideological proliferation of a privatised American Dream (as injurious charade). For Jetter, a Chicano negotiating a plethora of marginalised identities, the party games (the games played by political parties) have adverse effects, spewing out and perpetuating toxic rhetoric.

Manifest Destiny is tied to notions of expansion through procreation; indeed the annexing of Texas in 1845 was justified as a necessary occupation to secure land for the burgeoning U.S. population. Similarly, the Mexican inability to *populate* their Northern territories is seen to exacerbate this colonisation of land. John L. Escobedo argues that blood was a crucial component of Manifest destiny; American claims to possess Anglo-Saxon blood – a substance rich in moral fibre, suffused with an innate will to claim freedom and democracy – endowed them with a right to rule and a mandate to suppress the decadent, dirty, mixed-blood Mexicans.<sup>79</sup> Here an American brand of freedom is maintained through the reproduction of certain kinds of bodies, the erasure of other kinds

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<sup>78</sup> Gamboa Jr., 'Jetter's Jinx,' 233.

<sup>79</sup> John L. Escobedo, 'Mystical Frontiers: Manifest Destiny, Aztlán, and the Cosmic Race,' *A Companion to the Literature and Culture of the American West*, ed. Nicolas S. Witschi (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 179.

of (no)bodies, and a prejudicial dialectic of blood. In the time of AIDS, Gamboa Jr. lambasts, this is still palpable.

Nopal is an intriguing character warranting greater consideration. He is a perverse manifestation wrenched from the recesses of Jetter's subconscious, a corporeal echo of his insistent wants and murky desires. As evidenced in the scene cited above, Nopal's manipulation of Jetter is not merely physical but psychical; the "freedom" that Jetter has acquired is tempered by the realisation that his "conscience" – the position that Nopal inhabits – has been sacrificed. Nopal is ostensibly a reflection of Jetter, a middle-aged Chicano man dressed in a black tuxedo clutching a bottle of champagne, the voice inside his head, his devilish puppet-master. Throughout the play he teases and rebukes Jetter, sadistically pushing him to the edge of insanity, kindling the flames of his suicidal thoughts and, by the end of the performance, equipping him with the very weapon that could terminate his life:

NOPAL: You've known all along that no one was going to come to your party.  
JETTER: That kind of optimism will never get you anywhere. I invited only the best. You were obviously a typographical error.  
NOPAL: What about the truth of the terror in Jetter?

*NOPAL hands JETTER a mirror, JETTER looks into it and smokes nervously.*

JETTER: Well, lately I do get these headaches followed by a queasy sensation of fatigue. At times I'm motivated to crawl on my hands and knees, to bite the hand that teases me.  
NOPAL: That's symptomatically typical of the initial stages.  
JETTER: Sometimes I become rather melancholic as I recall inadequate experiences with inanimate objects.  
NOPAL: That's symptomatically perverse.

*NOPAL produces a small gift-wrapped package.*

NOPAL: I hope you like surprises. It's a curious curio for the incurable, the incorrigible, and the incompatible.

*NOPAL hands the gift to JETTER.*

NOPAL: It's offered on behalf of your guests who never arrived but who have departed.

*JETTER unwraps the gift and reveals a pistol ammunition clip.*

NOPAL: It's the missing ingredient that you needed in order to play roulette solitaire. You have fifteen rounds in which to learn the game of no chance.

*NOPAL takes the ammunition clip and inserts it into the pistol.*

*He cocks the pistol and hands it to JETTER.*

JETTER: My id is an idiot.<sup>80</sup>

The outlandish trickster becomes the idiotic id. For Sigmund Freud the id is “the dark, inaccessible part of our personality [...] a cauldron full of seething excitations,” and an “instinctual cathexes seeking discharge.”<sup>81</sup> As the action portents, Jetter must discharge a gun to discharge an embodied emotion plaguing the mind, Nopal himself. Not entirely a figment of the imagination, Nopal nevertheless encompasses the uncontained drives in Jetter, his wish for release from the relentless decimation of his friends from AIDS. Freud continues:

There is nothing in the id that corresponds to the idea of time; there is no recognition of the passage of time, and — a thing that is most remarkable and awaits consideration in philosophical thought — no alteration in its mental processes is produced by the passage of time. Wishful impulses which have never passed beyond the id, but impressions, too, which have been sunk into the id by repression, are virtually immortal; after the passage of decades they behave as though they had just occurred.<sup>82</sup>

Through the vicissitudes of a history that stretches from U.S. expansion in the Southwest to the subcultural antics of the Vietnam War era to the early years of the American AIDS epidemic, Jetter’s id is not bounded by any fixed temporality. I contend that Nopal is a projection of the turbulent history of mestizo people, reawakened in the mind of Jetter yet transmitted through generations of Chicano/as. He is a communal id, a frenzied mesh of feelings rooted in the psychical connectivity of a community. Certainly it is reductive to conceive of Nopal as merely an extension of an individual mind, a spectral presence that derives from Jetter alone; unlike Jetter, who is stuck in the moment, unable to leave, Nopal is allowed to depart at the end of the play, leaving Jetter alone on the empty stage. Nopal also enters the action through the audience, seated amongst the watching crowd; he is part of the collective, a member of a specific group of people witnessing the effects of HIV/AIDS on Chicano/a communities. As Jetter sits alone in the spotlight with a loaded gun pressed to his temple, he utters the ubiquitous hope of the early AIDS moment, a succinct mantra for a lost generation: “If only this were a nightmare.”<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Gamboa Jr, ‘Jetter’s Jinx,’ 239-240.

<sup>81</sup> Sigmund Freud, ‘The Dissection of the Psychical Personality,’ *New Introductory Lectures of Psychoanalysis* [1933], trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1965), 73, 74.

<sup>82</sup> Freud, ‘The Dissection of the Psychical Personality,’ 74.

<sup>83</sup> Gamboa Jr., ‘Jetter’s Jinx,’ 240.



## Browning the Epidemic

When asked in a 1998 *Los Angeles Times Magazine* interview why he wanted to be an artist, queer Chicano text-based performance artist and the 1997 recipient of the MacArthur “Genius” Foundation Fellowship, Luis Alfaro replied, “something inside me longed to remember. I wanted to be like the *sobadora* in the projects, a vessel of memory who could pass along all the important things.”<sup>84</sup> The preservation and transmission of memories during the devastation of the epidemic was certainly a key concern fuelling the bilingual, L.A.-based, AIDS interventionist theatre group Teatro VIVA! which performs short performances relating to issues facing gay and lesbian Latinos, with particular attention paid to educating and informing the community on HIV/AIDS.<sup>85</sup>

The work of Teatro VIVA! creates a lively archive chronicling the efforts made by gay and lesbian Latino/as to define their own reactions to the epidemic, an epidemic which from its arrival had consistently been posited as a “gay plague,” and as an affliction of white, male communities. As such, queer Latinos responding to HIV/AIDS often looked beyond the perimeters of gay culture in order to represent their place in the unfolding devastation, to find solace amidst an epidemic which in addition to claiming hundreds of thousands of lives in the U.S. has also illuminated the internal cracks, divisions, and oppressions which blight the image of a vibrant, homogenous gay community. As I have argued, this often constituted a looking back to the biological and cultural atrocities plaguing their ancestors and the resistance which flourished in response. However, the spread of HIV/AIDS in Latino communities has also ensured that this epidemic can never be understood in its relation to the past alone; it was, and continues to be, a crisis that demands immediate action. Examining the performance art of leading Teatro VIVA! members Araiza and Alfaro I will examine how attempts to root HIV/AIDS in recent memories, to counter the (literal) whitewashing of the epidemic, repositioned seminal experiences – the HIV test, AIDS activism, and social stigma – in specifically brown structures of feeling.

In the frenzied performance piece *H.I.Vato*, an autobiographical solo skit included as part of Teatro VIVA!’s 1992 collaboration *Deep in the Crotch of My Latino Psyche*,<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Cited in David L. Ulin, ‘The Ballard of Luis Alfaro,’ *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, November 15<sup>th</sup> 1998.

<sup>85</sup> See David Román, ‘Teatro VIVA! – Latino Performance and the Politics of AIDS in Los Angeles,’ *Acts of Intervention*, 177-201.

Theatre as an educational tool is in keeping with the traditions of Latino performance groups, such as Teatro Campesino, founded by Luis Valdez, and Culture Clash.

<sup>86</sup> *Deep in the Crotch of My Latino Psyche* was co-written by Araiza, Luis Alfaro, and Monica Palacios.

Araiza recounts a particularly transformative moment in his life: the day in 1984 when he walked into a Health Care Clinic in Hollywood, the day he found out that he had tested positive for HIV antibodies and was told (erroneously) that he had one year to live. A reaction to the dearth of AIDS-related theatre produced for, or by, Chicanos/Latinos *H.I.Vato* (vato meaning man or, more colloquially, dude) speaks the language of the barrio, hurtling from English to Spanish, from street slang to the antiseptic rhetoric of the clinical environment; it is fast-paced and evocative, oozing attitude and trenchant wit.

The action opens in the waiting room of a doctor's office. Tense and alone Araiza surveys the jarring, oppressive clinical landscape, the "blatant queer statements, spray painted onto queer, pastel-colored walls. Health prone declarations 'bout your rubbers, 'bout all your *pinche fregado*, ex-lovers – 'bout what you put up your ass and signs telling me, 'Pos, no te juetas, si you don't got no cash.'" <sup>87</sup> He views the forthright sexual health paraphernalia adorning the walls from a distance; the advice emanating from the sanctioned channels of the medical community (anathema to him, out of kilter with his Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism and alternative approach to wellbeing) is not seen to address him for it is packaged to accommodate the experiences of an absent third party, an abstract "you." <sup>88</sup> Only one sliver of information seems unambiguously aimed at him: the bilingual, grammatically inept, acerbic signs demanding payment (in the form of cash alone), brazen emblems of a privatised, unequal health care system that adversely penalises minorities and exacerbates poverty in the U.S. This is echoed later when the "main man, white on white, voodoo, big daddy" doctor coolly delivers the positive test result, bamboozling Araiza with medical jargon and, without pause, anglicising his name: "'Albert...' he calls me by my white name! I adjust. 'May I call you, Albert?' I said, 'Of course,' knowing I was giving away my greatest power." <sup>89</sup> Here the white coat becomes an extension of white skin, an unconvincing foil. Araiza continues:

But check it out. After a while [...] I find myself becoming something other than my mad queer-ness, *loco mestizo* self. Find myself adjusting, assimilating, acculturating; intuitively. Beto, you know how to sit other than who you really are. You know how to sound other than who you really are. You know how to become other than who you really are. <sup>90</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Alberto Antonio Araiza, 'Excerpt from H.I.Vato – A Performance Piece,' *Journal of Medical Humanities*, Vol. 19, Nos. 2/3, (June 1998), 92-97, 93.

<sup>88</sup> Indeed Teatro VIVA brought HIV prevention information into Latino bars because they knew that the information in clinics was not designed for this demographic. For a discussion of Araiza's religious views see Ged Kenslea, 'HIV Optimistic,' *Thrive Magazine* (Summer 2001), 18-20.

<sup>89</sup> Araiza, 'H.I.Vato,' 94.

<sup>90</sup> Araiza, *H.I.Vato*, 93-94.

Araiza's consistently denigrated mestizo heritage, his experience acculturating with U.S. culture, directly impacts how he is able to deal with the HIV diagnosis. In reaction to this traumatic event he must instinctively merge with a hostile social sphere; only through mechanisms of assimilation and acculturation can he access the information, the treatment, and the expertise which may keep him alive, expertise which he later refutes. As a queer Chicano he is already equipped with the ability to negotiate mainstream society.

However, his identification as a queer Chicano constantly seems precarious. His occupation of a "mad queer-ness, loco mestizo" self relies on the bifurcation of his sexuality and his race; his queerness is anglicised, rooted in a history of gay liberation in the West; his race is Hispanicised, reflecting a history of mixed-blood defiance throughout the Americas. Both "queer" and "mestizo" are nomenclatures of resistance yet remain for Araiza mutually exclusive. This is certainly hinted at in his earlier work. In the performance piece *Meat My Beat* (1990), a play on the euphemism "beat my meat," devised for the Los Angeles based gay and lesbian performance ensemble Celebration Theatre, Araiza rages at the audience,

I'm watching my brothers and sisters die. I'm watching our children die. and I'm watching you think and treat me like I'm the cause. you want me to act up, don't you. you want to identify, seek and destroy. well I'm not going to be civilly [sic] disobedient. I'm a person of color! I don't have to be civilly disobedient. I don't have to be civilly jackshit! I wanna kick some fucking ass!!<sup>91</sup>

Araiza's outpouring of anger is certainly directed at the pluralised "you," at the homophobic, racist "general population" allowing the continuation of HIV/AIDS. However, the "you" indicated also seems to name another faction, the faction who want him to express himself through acts of civil disobedience, the faction who want him to "act up." By using this particular phrase, which references the AIDS activist group ACT UP, Araiza disassociates himself and his performance from the identities and performances constructed by predominantly white, male homosexuals. As a person of colour in a racist society he rejects regimens of civil disobedience for he has no faith in their efficacy; he does not wish to civilly negotiate society (which retains an illusion of respect) he wants to defy it.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Alberto Antonio Araiza, 'Meat my Beat' [1990], *Celebration Theatre Collection*, Series 2: Theatrical Performances 1983-2007, Box 4: Folder 7. This collection is part of ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives, Los Angeles. Accessed April 2012.

<sup>92</sup> Lillian Faderman and Stuart Timmons argue that ACT UP was met with suspicion by many people of colour in L.A.: "When Jim McDaniels, an African American raised in a white enclave in Orange County, became the facilitator of ACT UP's new People of Color Coalition, one member of the group remarked, 'It's so great to have you here because you know how to navigate the white power structure of ACT UP.'"

This dislocation from white, gay culture subtly resonates in ‘Federal Building,’ a vignette included in the performance piece ‘Downtown’ (1990), an evocative caper through the sights, sounds and characters of the Pico-Union district of Los Angeles, a largely Central American (often undocumented) immigrant enclave. Written and performed by Alfaro, this scene explores his positioning as a gay Chicano in East Los Angeles. As a child Alfaro is enamoured with the Federal Building – “a big beautiful marble structure,” a “house of justice, invented by men in blue suits with badges” – which he would drive by with his father, searching for recently arrived Mexican relatives “with phony passports ready for a life in Our Lady of the Angels.”<sup>93</sup> But now he approaches it as an adult and as an activist. Having attended *Gabacho* (Anglo) civil disobedience training Alfaro joins the angry hoards of ACT UP/LA protestors, marching against the NEA crackdown on “homosexual” art amidst cries of “Freedom of Speech” – “AIDS funding now” – “Alto a la censura” – “Stop AIDS, ACT UP, Fight Back” – “We’re here, We’re queer, Get use to it,” and the more pointed, “That nasty ole dirty downtown is going to get a good look at us, uh-huh. We are going to run up and down her streets and when we get to Miss Federal Building we are going to spit in the old bitch’s face.”<sup>94</sup> However, unlike most of the other demonstrators this “nasty ole dirty downtown” is Alfaro’s home, and the Federal Building is an old friend: “We have a long history together, this *ruca* and I. She has watched me grow up and play on her steps. Watched me low ride in front of her.”<sup>95</sup> And the spit that flies in “the old bitch’s face” is not the first she has received; as Alfaro reminisces, she has “Watched me spit at her face at an Immigration demonstration that I don’t understand but comprehend enough to know that my dad can go back anytime, just never when he wants to.”<sup>96</sup> Alfaro’s deliberate use of the word “Gabacho” shows that for him the civil disobedience practiced by ACT UP will never truly be able to advocate for his polymorphous positionality.

For the other members of the swelling crowd, the Federal Building is a symbol of repression and an affront to their civil liberties. For his immigrant father and his Mexican relatives it is a bastion of surveillance, a dangerous space of inclusion and exclusion. Yet for Alfaro this relationship is complex. He is native to Los Angeles. He is a queer Chicano

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McDaniels was stunned to realize that some members of the People of Color Coalition saw ACT UP – which had prided itself on being an open populist alternative to an unresponsive power structure – as merely another part of the white power structure.” See Faderman and Timmons, *Gay L.A.: A History of Sexual Outlaws, Power Politics, and Lipstick Lesbians* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 293.

<sup>93</sup> Luis Alfaro, ‘Federal Building,’ *Men on Men 4: Best New Gay Fiction*, ed. George Stambolian (New York: Plume, 1992), 278-281.

<sup>94</sup> Alfaro, ‘Federal Building,’ 279.

<sup>95</sup> Alfaro, ‘Federal Building,’ 279. *Ruca* translates as a “tough broad,” a term of endearment.

<sup>96</sup> Alfaro, ‘Federal Building,’ 279.

straddling his Mexican heritage and his militant sexuality. His belief in the unalienable privileges of rights-based U.S. citizenship - “Because you see, justice can put up with the angry *Chicanada* at their doorstep. But *Mexicanos* with an *avenida* for an address bring illegally parked taco trucks, fake gold, and Columbian drug smugglers on their backs”<sup>97</sup> – is about to be shaken. While policemen in plastic gloves place him under arrest, he looks up at the Federal Building:

I want to run my hand along her marble curves, play with her buttons, stare up at her long tall walls and admire her beauty. But these handcuffs lead me to a cell in her basement. So it isn't distant Mexican relatives from *ranchos* in *Jalisco* that get to share intimate moments with Justice deep in her bowels. It's one of her own.<sup>98</sup>

He wants to embrace this emblem of democracy, to believe that its gargantuan beauty reflects a benevolent state. But the AIDS crisis, the punitive restriction of artistic freedom, and immigration legislation have irrevocably altered his purview; now he is the outsider who, like those far off relatives of his memories, is sequestered in the excretory organ of the Justice mechanism, enclosed in those fetid recesses that signify his ambivalent relationship to the American nation and his intimate interaction with regimes of assimilation and ejection. He concludes:

I didn't get arrested because my government wants to control the content of art money, or because a Republican from Orange County thinks that all AIDS activists are a “dying breed,” or because a black-and-white can stop you anytime, anywhere, for whatever reason.

I got arrested because [the former] Mayor Sam Yorty told me we were all the Mayor. Because big buildings stare down at you with a *chale* stare. Because I've lived here all my life and I've never owned anything, much less this city.<sup>99</sup>

His confrontation with AIDS brings him back in line with the experiences of his Mexican immigrant relatives as they crossed the border into the United States. His activism, his solidarity, and his compassion in the face of the persistent eradication of rights and bodies connects him with narratives of past displacement, and reminds him that, despite his claims to U.S. citizenship, he has always existed at the margins of the mainstream.

In another scene taken from ‘Downtown’ Alfaro remembers cutting his finger whilst cavorting through his mother's rosebush as a child. Presenting his bleeding hand to

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<sup>97</sup> Alfaro, ‘Federal Building,’ 279.

<sup>98</sup> Alfaro, ‘Federal Building,’ 280.

<sup>99</sup> Alfaro, ‘Federal Building,’ 280-281.

his grandmother, the young Alfaro is simultaneously fascinated and disturbed as she begins to suck on the “afflicted digit,” applying what he refers to as “primitive Latino first aid,” an indigenous panacea:

*I feel the inside of her mouth  
wet and warm  
her teeth  
lightly pulling  
equally comforting  
and disgusting  
at the same time*

*Being in this womb  
feels as if I am being  
eaten alive  
on one of those  
late night  
Thriller Chiller movies  
Vampira: Senior Citizen Bloodsucker*

*But it isn't that at all  
this is the only way  
that Abuelita  
knows how to  
stop the bleeding*

*I've been redeemed by the blood of the lamb  
Filled with the holy ghost I am  
All my sins are washed away  
I've been redeemed<sup>100</sup>*

Returning to the space of his family, his body pulled inside the recesses of his grandmother's form, becomes a moment of sacrifice and redemption. His assimilation with the “womb” sharply deviates from some lurid fantasy of castration, a slide into a Freudian nightmare; now this inclusion in female space encodes an affective engagement with his blood as both vital bodily fluid and as a substance of heredity. Here his deliverance is not contingent on the blood(shed) of some abstract deity but rather on the resourcefulness of his kin, embalmed in the administering of “primitive,” decidedly racialised, care giving. “What is imagined is a rehabilitated and reimagined Latino family,” José Esteban Muñoz notes, “one that is necessary in the face of a devastating and alienating pandemic. Memory performance reinvents the space of familia. It is a hub of identity consolidation. This hub is

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<sup>100</sup> Luis Alfaro, ‘Downtown,’ *O Solo Homo: The New Queer Performance*, ed. Holly Hughes and David Román (New York: Grove Press, 1999), 335-336.

reinhabited through the auspices of memory performance.”<sup>101</sup> However, like Proust’s madeleine, the memory of the blood trickling from his finger sparks involuntary memory, creating a reconfigured Latino infrastructure, which extends from the figure of his grandmother and stretches to those affected by the AIDS epidemic:

*See this finger?  
I cut it at work  
making another pamphlet  
critical of those  
who would like to see  
us dead  
four gay Latinos  
in one room*

*They’re afraid to touch my wound  
would prefer  
to see it bleed  
and gush  
than to question  
mortality  
and fate*

*Could go on about  
being tested  
but it seems  
so futile  
as if we  
don’t know  
that one little HIV test  
could be wrong*

*Hold the finger  
in front of me  
stick it  
close to mouth  
drip drip drip  
all over desk top*

*Hold it close  
to face  
quickly  
without warning  
stick it inside my mouth  
and I begin to  
suck  
on it*

*Tears roll down*

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<sup>101</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, ‘Memory Performance: Luis Alfaro’s “Cuerpo Politizado,”’ *Corpus Delecti*, 109.

*salty wet  
tears  
down my face  
I can feel  
my teeth  
lightly pulling  
and I wish*

*I wish for an Abuelita  
in this time of plague  
in this time of loss  
in this time of sorrow  
in this time of mourning  
in this time of shame*

*And I  
heal myself with  
primitive Latino first aid kit<sup>102</sup>*

His blood links him to his grandmother and to other gay men; the emphasis of the signifying import of his blood (as a substance of familial affinity, as a substance potentially harbouring a dangerous virus) shifts throughout his life. Through the detonation of both memories, the mingling of these cerebral secretions, Alfaro is forced to confront the potency of his blood. Memory, much like the blood that refuses to be contained within the boundaries of the body, performs momentous acts of interconnection. The suggestion seems to be that Alfaro's biological family is absent, that his abuelita cannot be reconfigured in the immediate past, cannot lend support or rectify the situation with her Latino first aid. However, through the aberrations of memory and the deconstruction of linear time, notions of being "present" are fundamentally queried.

In the heart of East Los Angeles stands *The Wall/Las Memorias*.<sup>103</sup> Set in Lincoln Park amidst a communal garden, this memorial consists of six panels of original artwork, a modern art installation – "The Arch of Hope" – and an array of granite facades engraved with the names of people who have died of AIDS over the course of the epidemic [Figures 21 and 22].<sup>104</sup> *The Wall* was the first publically funded AIDS memorial in the United

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<sup>102</sup> Alfaro, 'Downtown,' 336-338.

<sup>103</sup> See [www.thewalllasmemorias.org](http://www.thewalllasmemorias.org).

<sup>104</sup> *The Wall/Las Memorias* indexes earlier efforts to commemorate mestizo/a heritage in L.A. In the 1970s, artist Judith Baca, in collaboration with the Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC) designed and executed a piece of community artwork dubbed 'The Great Wall of Los Angeles.' This mural depicts scenes of ethnic California from Pre-Historic times to the 1950s. Plans for the continuation of the wall have been released; for the panel depicting the 1980s, AIDS is explored tangentially, tacked onto the problem of homelessness which resulted from Republican Reaganomics, hinted at rather than stressed. See [www.sparcmurals.org](http://www.sparcmurals.org).



States; it stands as a bastion of commemoration and education for Los Angeles's Latino community. Conceived of in the early 1990s by community organiser and activist Richard Zaldivar, the memorial did not materialise until over ten years later; it was finally unveiled on World AIDS Day, December 1<sup>st</sup> 2004.

This controversial memorial has incited powerful emotions. It has been lampooned as a brazen rebuke to the constitutionally mandated separation of church and state through the inclusion of artwork depicting Aztec deities, chastised as a flagrant misuse of taxpayers' money, and denigrated as a morally bankrupt monument to homosexuals and drug addicts placed in close proximity to "decent, law-abiding" residents.<sup>105</sup> "You can't take from the living to give to the dead,"<sup>106</sup> Lincoln Heights Neighbourhood Council member Mary Luz Pacheco admonishes, but I prefer Bob Rafsky's eulogy given at an ACT UP/New York political funeral: "when the living can no longer speak the dead may speak for them."<sup>107</sup>

The firestorm of criticism that has raged over how to commemorate HIV/AIDS in Latino communities aptly represents the challenges facing the cultural producers discussed in this chapter. As Erika Doss notes, the explosion of memorials in the twentieth century "heightened anxieties about who and what should be remembered in America. The passionate debates in which they are often embroiled represent efforts to harness those anxieties and control particular narratives about the nation and its publics."<sup>108</sup> Indeed the controversy *The Wall/Las Memorias* has provoked encompasses not only issues of HIV/AIDS visibility but also the problems of memorialising aspects of Latino history, especially aspects which encroach on the hegemony of Christianity in the U.S. For Latino populations living with HIV/AIDS, the whitewashing of history becomes doubly prevalent and doubly insidious for, as I have argued, many queer Latinos have approached HIV/AIDS through the lens of their cultural and ethnic heritage.

The conflation of HIV/AIDS with memory has saturated discourse. From biomedical discussions of the compromised immune system as an ineffective lack of

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<sup>105</sup> In particular World Net Daily News reported on the controversies surrounding the inclusion of a panel depicting the Aztec god Quetzalcoatl in the memorial. See Art Moore 'Lawmakers sneak 'Aztec God' into Budget,' <http://www.wnd.com/2003/07/20047> and 'Taxpayers to Fund Pagan AIDS Memorial?' <http://www.wnd.com/2003/06/19388>. Accessed April 9<sup>th</sup> 2013

<sup>106</sup> Li Fellers, 'Los Angeles: Memorial for Lincoln Park Wins Preliminary Ok,' 25<sup>th</sup> March 2003, see [www.thebody.com/cdc/news\\_updates\\_archive/2003/mar25\\_03/la\\_aids\\_memorial.html](http://www.thebody.com/cdc/news_updates_archive/2003/mar25_03/la_aids_memorial.html). Accessed April 9<sup>th</sup> 2013. Originally printed in *Los Angeles Times*, March 2003.

<sup>107</sup> This is from a speech made by Bob Rafsky at the political funeral of Mark Fisher on 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1992 in New York City. A video recording of this speech is included in the documentaries *United in Anger: A History of ACT UP* produced by Jim Hubbard and Sarah Schulman and *How to Survive a Plague* directed by David France, both released in 2012.

<sup>108</sup> Erika Doss, *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 2.

memory cells, to the construction of late twentieth century gay communities mired in degenerative processes of cultural amnesia, to the memorialisation of the dead, the arrival of AIDS has certainly produced a crisis of memory in the U.S. However, access to “official” memory (as a public collection of censored and often highly prejudicial narratives) has been adversely affected by structures of racism, sexism, and homophobia. By way of close analysis of the work of a group of under-represented gay Chicano men, I have explored the ways in which cultural producers have looked to the past in order to survive the devastation of the present. Although the mixing of infected bodily fluids may have signified the implosion of the past for certain gay white male factions, as Castiglia and Reed contend, for these queer Chicanos, the AIDS epidemic positioned the past (and memories of the past) as crucial community tools. Through the careful (re)appropriation and mythicisation of collective and personal histories these writers, artists, and performers fought against their own mythicisation and their own erasure from the history of HIV/AIDS.

## Conclusion

### Art after ART

In the early 1990s, gay Cuban-American doctor Rafael Campo was working on AIDS wards in San Francisco. Daily he would draw the blood of his desperately ill patients, arduously working to conceal his disgust, his fear, and his rising lust. “I know I have been dying of AIDS since the moment I first learned about the virus. Each smooth tube of blood I draw seems to come from my own scarred and indurated veins,” he declares. “Any disease that could erase from the world the bodies of so many people like me, people with whom I had not even had the chance to form the bond of community, would seem necessarily to take with it small parts of my anatomy.”<sup>1</sup> In a poem published in 1994, he recounts one particular experience:

One day, I drew his blood, and while I did  
He laughed, and said I was his girlfriend now,  
His blood-brother. “Vampire-slut,” he cried,  
“You’ll make me live forever!” Wrinkled brows  
Were all I managed in reply. I know  
I’m drowning in his blood, his purple blood.  
I filled my seven tubes; the warmth was slow  
To leave them, pressed inside my palm. I’m sad  
Because he doesn’t see my face. Because  
I can’t identify with him. I hate  
The fact that he’s my age, and that across  
My skin he’s there, my blood-brother, my mate.<sup>2</sup>

For Campo, extracting the blood from the bodies of his patients, patients analogised as his own monstrous doppelgangers – “I saw my own face over and over again in their faces, the dark complexions, the mustaches, the self-deprecation”<sup>3</sup> – provokes a flash of recognition, and in so doing works to construct ambiguous affective bonds. The taking of blood becomes, to return to Tim Dean’s rendering of viral kinship, a “mechanism of alliance, a

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<sup>1</sup> Campo, *The Desire to Heal*, 29. Campo opens with a recollection of a flamboyant, preoperative male-to-female transsexual, Aurora, the patient who first forced the young gay doctor to open himself up to the reality of AIDS and the ambivalent feelings physicians hold for their patients. Campo’s interactions with Aurora also subtly uncover a new form of relatedness, a new vector of my rendering of viral mestizaje. “When [Aurora] died she left behind an element of herself in me,” he writes, “Instead of giving me AIDS as I had so irrationally feared, she gave me hope.” See Campo, *The Desire to Heal*, 32. The performance of drawing Aurora’s blood, the intimacy that this exchange evokes, ensures, in the end, that part of Aurora is interpellated into the body of Campo.

<sup>2</sup> Rafael Campo, ‘The Distant Moon,’ *The Other Man Was Me: A Voyage to the New World* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1994), 113.

<sup>3</sup> Campo, *The Desire to Heal*, 28.

way of forming consanguinity with strangers or friends,”<sup>4</sup> a way for lovers to become (blood) brothers, a way for blood-brothers to be imagined as lovers: “I was his girlfriend now, his blood-brother.” Campo becomes represented as a licentious vampire, a dark, blood-drenched figure hiding behind the pale visage of a white coat, piercing the body and draining the blood, rendering the afflicted more vulnerable, yet also incubating a vital substance, proffering the possibility of immortality: “You’ll make me live forever.” Here the doctor, like the vampire, is charged with the responsibility of extending life. But Campo’s poem hints at a further connection, a further spectre haunting the iconography of infected blood and of blood-mixing. For Campo, the possibility of forging consanguinity through blood-mixing is not only shadowed by the sexuality of his male patient (a sexual subject position he ambivalently shares) but by his *skin*, the symbol of his race and his culture. Years later, remembering this incident, he writes:

I have nightmares sometimes that I am drowning in blood, that blood is too plentiful, that there is so much blood I can sink a bucket into it, blood flowing like rich red satin sheets rolling in the wind, blood that tastes sweet instead of salty, blood pouring from my mouth like a mournful Spanish song, the blood of my ancestors telling its most precious and guarded secrets, how much potassium, how much sodium, the composition like that of the minerals in Cuba’s fertile soil.<sup>5</sup>

The blood of his patient, the blood threatening to overtake him, to get inside him, to permanently alter him, is transformed in Campo’s imaginary into a substance which intimately indexes his own culture. It is metamorphosed into a lyrical Spanish tune oozing from his lips; it becomes the blood of his ancestors, a concoction brimming with minerals to rival the rich soil of his homeland. Through the iconography of blood, a fluid which because it is impregnated with HIV can no longer be contained within the body, the doctor and the patient are linked together, analogised as lovers, as brothers, and as products of Cuba. By extracting the infected blood of his patients and, more pertinently, by investing this action with deep significance, Campo is constructing viral *mestizaje*.

In this thesis I have demonstrated that in the 80s and 90s a broad range of cultural production emerged that highlighted the ways that representations of HIV as a blood-borne disorder sculpted and transformed Latino identities, identities already mired in narratives of mixed-blood. By focusing upon the creative output of an intensely marginalised group, gay Latinos, I have shown how individuals negotiated complex narratives of blood-mixing (as a process of racial and cultural formation) to reflect upon the U.S. HIV/AIDS epidemic

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<sup>4</sup> Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, 6.

<sup>5</sup> Campo, *The Desire to Heal*, 160-161.

and to construct alternative narratives which centralised the experiences of queer people of colour. Furthermore, I have argued that cultural producers utilised blood-mixing to explore the relatedness of bodies at the end of the twentieth century.

In 1996 the landscape of gay culture radically altered. The success of antiretroviral therapy (ART) did not merely entrench lines of dissent between white gay men and communities of colour, women, and those outside the West, it also highlighted the extreme fractiousness within gay communities. Restored health allowed some people to make strategic political choices, to move towards individual preservation and embrace conservative agendas. The late 90s witnessed the rise of gay neoconservatism, with commentators such as Andrew Sullivan, Gabriel Rotello, and Bruce Bawer lauded as mouthpieces for a recalibrated gay community; this shift marked a disjuncture with earlier practices of positioning queer critique in antithesis to heteronormativity and the mainstreaming of gay politics.<sup>6</sup> To counter the growing conservative agenda, the post-protease moment saw an increase in activism (the efficacy of ACT UP and Queer Nation having declined in the years prior to this); in 1997 Sex Panic! formed to oppose new legislation, such as amendments to the New York State Sanitary Code, that ostensibly promoted gay rights through the policing of homosex and the restriction of public space, that demonised gay male “promiscuity” in the name of HIV/AIDS prevention.<sup>7</sup>

For some critics, the introduction of effective drug regimens also hailed a return to the pre-AIDS days of sexual abandon. In July 1997, *The Advocate* boasted a front cover proclaiming ‘Sex, Drugs and Bathhouses are Back!’ and included an article by David Heitz, ‘Men Behaving Badly,’ which suggested a slide back into a sexual hedonism of the 1970s.<sup>8</sup> 1997 also saw a rise in national and international circuit parties and the invention of the label “bareback” to denote unprotected anal intercourse between men, inconceivable to many before this period. In an article entitled ‘Bareback and Reckless,’ printed in *Out* magazine in July 1997, gay conservative critic Michelangelo Signorile condemned the new aspects of queer culture which encouraged unprotected sex. Interestingly this screed was an oblique reflection of his 1995 *New York Times* piece, ‘HIV Positive and Careless’; it seems that, for Signorile at least, the advent of ART in 1996 transformed gay male sexual

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<sup>6</sup> See Richard Goldstein, *The Attack Queers: Liberal Society and the Gay Right* (London: Verso, 2002) and Paul Robinson, *Queer Wars: The New Gay Right and Its Critics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Sex Panic! is a pro-queer, pro-feminist, anti-racist direct action group formed in 1997 in New York, committed to ensuring sexual liberation in the wake of AIDS. It was formed in response to New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani’s urban rezoning policies designed to obstruct sex-related businesses from opening in urban areas and promoting the closure of public spaces and commercial enterprises that encouraged gay sexual interaction.

<sup>8</sup> David Heitz, ‘Men Behaving Badly,’ *The Advocate*, Issue 737, July 8<sup>th</sup> 1997, 26-29.

behaviour from (understandably) careless to (pathologically) reckless, from innocent to guilty within two years. Evidently the erotic lives of (predominantly white, middle class) gay men were beginning to transform in the wake of protease inhibitors; with AIDS no longer given crisis status, an arena allowed other factions to contribute to an ever unfolding HIV/AIDS discourse.

Certainly the story of HIV/AIDS has changed dramatically since the protease moment. The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) was set up in 1996 to advocate for global action to curb the epidemic. The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria, created in 2002, and the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), signed into law in 2003 (twenty two years after AIDS actually became an emergency, George W. Bush lauded for something Reagan should have done), both committed funds to curtail the crisis on the African continent. In 2008 the "Swiss Statement" confirmed the efficacy of viral-suppressive drugs, adding the caveat that successful adherence to ART potentially rendered users non-infectious. In 2010 the Obama administration implemented the first National AIDS Prevention Strategy and the Affordable Care Act (or "Obamacare"), hailed as landmark achievements by the first U.S. President to publically advocate for marriage equality, the first President to select an openly gay, Latino man – Richard Blanco – as the inaugural poet.<sup>9</sup> Concurrently, the travel ban of 1987 was lifted, and at the 19<sup>th</sup> International AIDS Conference, held in July 2012 in Washington D.C. – the first time the U.S. had hosted the conference since 1990 – rhetoric of an "AIDS-Free Generation" dominated the proceedings.<sup>10</sup>

But despite these steps, HIV transmission rates continue to rise, especially amongst gay and bisexual men of colour, whilst sex education and access to health care are still woefully inadequate.<sup>11</sup> Thus how can cultural production function in an era of hope and stagnation, when memories of the horrific early years of the epidemic continue to be depleted, AIDS activism inside the U.S. is diluted, and successful adherence to drug

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<sup>9</sup> On March 6<sup>th</sup> 2014 Obama engaged in a town-hall-style event at the Newseum in Washington D.C. calling for Latino/a groups to sign up to the Affordable Care Act. He assured Latino/as that signing up for new insurance exchanges would not result in the deportation of their family members who reside in the U.S. illegally. However, he was unexpectedly lampooned for his actions regarding immigration; he responded by claiming that he was not, as some have termed him, the "deporter-in-chief," but rather the "champion-in-chief" dedicated to advocating for Latino/a interests.

<sup>10</sup> This slogan – which became the tagline for the conference – is highly suggestive and problematic. It seems to emphasize futurism as the only hope for the eradication of AIDS. The use of the word "generation" suggests that this generation, the first and the second generation of the epidemic, is beyond help; now only the welfare of future generations is applicable. Generationality as a concept is also not in keeping with some queer community formation.

<sup>11</sup> In November 2011 CDC launched 'Testing Makes US Stronger,' the first U.S. national HIV Testing campaign aimed specifically at Black MSM (deemed a particularly at risk demographic), created in consultation with these communities. The campaign depicts black men occupying a wide spectrum of identities, from "preppy" to "hood." See <http://hivtest.cdc.gov/stronger/index.html>.

regimes hint at the bifurcation of HIV-positive populations into (darkly) infectious and (white) non-infectious subcategories? How have Latino activists, artists, and writers taken up the charge to remember HIV/AIDS in their communities (as with The Wall/Las Memorias project in Los Angeles, for example) and recommit to strategies of creating culturally relevant education and prevention material? And as cultural production that directly engages with HIV/AIDS has significantly declined amongst (once voraciously prolific) white gay men in urban centres since ART, how have gay Latinos reinvigorated artistic expression as a legitimate and essential (community) tool in the fight against LGBT persecution and HIV/AIDS?

In 2004 Jaime Cortez, a queer Mexican-American writer, HIV/AIDS prevention educator and advocate, and co-founder of the gay Latino comedy troupe Latin Hustle, created the exciting and innovative bilingual HIV-prevention comic *Sexile/Sexilio*.<sup>12</sup> In the inaugural edition of *Corpus*, a multimedia HIV/AIDS prevention journal (comprised of seven issues spanning 2003-2008) showcasing the art and writing of gay men of colour, George Ayala, the former Director of Education at the AIDS Project Los Angeles (APLA) and now the Executive Officer for the Global Forum on MSM and HIV, pinpointed the failing of much early prevention literature: “One of the great ironies of the AIDS era [...] is the inordinate attention given to understanding the biology of HIV in the body without regard to the bodies hosting the virus.”<sup>13</sup> *Sexile* answers this call; it places *bodies* (interacting in economies of race, gender, sexuality, class, nationality) at the heart of prevention education. “We have all seen the ‘Brush your teeth, kiddies!’ type of public health comics before. Proscriptive and simplistic social intervention comics abounded,” Cortez, Ayala, and artist and cultural worker Patrick “Pato” Hebert contend, discussing the thought process behind *Sexile*, “but what we had not yet seen and what we hungered for were comics invested in the questions of wellness within the context of complicated, contradictory queer lives.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Latin Hustle was founded by Cortez, Al Luján, and Lito Sandoval in the 1990s and performed skits detailing the objectification of queer Latinos. Cortez is also the editor of *Virgins*, *Guerrillas & Locas*, and his writing has appeared in *Queer Papi Porn*, *2sexE*, *Bésame Mucho*, and *Best Gay Erotica 2001*.

<sup>13</sup> George Ayala, ‘Foreword,’ *Corpus*, ed. Jaime Cortez, vol. 1, no. 1 (Spring 2003), vii.

The success of *Corpus* and *Sexile* sparked a further collaboration between Cortez and Hebert, a compilation of various HIV prevention comic-strips created by gay men. See *Turnover: A Collection of HIV Prevention Comics*, ed. Jaime Cortez (Los Angeles: Institute for Gay Men’s Health, 2005). APLA has also commissioned several magazines aimed exclusively at African-American MSM. These include *Think Again* (2003), *If We Have to Take Tomorrow* (2006), *To Be Left with the Body* (2008), and *War Diaries* (2010).

<sup>14</sup> George Ayala, Jaime Cortez, Patrick “Pato” Hebert, ‘Where There’s *Querer*: Knowledge Production and the Praxis of HIV Prevention,’ *Latina/o Sexualities: Probing Powers, Passions, Practices, and Policies*, ed. Marysol Asencio (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 165.

*Sexile* tells the true story of Adela Vasquez, a Cuban “wild-child” with a voracious sexual appetite, a proud Marielita and detainee at the Fort Chaffee refugee camp – “Some people in Cuba say that the day the Marielitos left was the day Cuba flushed the toilet. I say flush away, bitch”<sup>15</sup> – an unapologetic drug-(ab)user, and self-proclaimed “exotic Cuban she-male”<sup>16</sup> sex-worker in Los Angeles. Based on an earlier interview with Vasquez conducted by Cortez, the “fine weave[r] of [her] many yarns,”<sup>17</sup> the life of this remarkable male-to-female transgender emigrant, a dedicated transgender rights activist and HIV/AIDS educator, working with the legendary if now defunct San Francisco-based foundation Proyecto ContraSIDA Por Vida, is vividly captured, wielded as a holistic, grassroots resource for the promotion of queer Latino wellbeing in the age of HIV/AIDS. “Because [Adela’s] story is so fucked up, fabulous, raggedy and human,” Cortez asserts, “it opens up a vast space where we can all ponder our own sense of risk, exile and home.”<sup>18</sup> As interlocutor, Adela provides the inspiration and the irreverent voice. As interpreter, Cortez provides the illustrations and the agenda.

Verbal and visual, the comic book form is an intriguing vessel for the transmission of HIV-prevention information in the twenty-first century. Comics are fast-paced and inclusive; the literacy of the reader is not at the centre of the production. Information is displayed in pointed, bite-size kernels, thus a broad range of issues can be explored within a relatively small space. Comics spawn collaborations and require the complicity of the reader to contour interpretation. Furthermore, comic books are able to *show*, rather than merely describe, sexual acts and the adoption of safe-sex practices, such as the right way to use condoms; they instruct as well as entertain. Comics display for the viewing audience the (often otherwise censored) sights, sounds, and emotions of a full range of human intimacies.

In this thesis I have championed viral mestizaje as a culturally relevant way of revealing and creating affiliation between bodies constructed in relation to race, sexuality, and disease. Yet mestizaje does more than merely name patterns of blood flow or the transfer of “substance” between bodies, communities, and cultures. The creators of *Sexile* appropriate mestizaje as a theoretical means of exploring “syncretic and inclusive”

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<sup>15</sup> Jaime Cortez, *Sexile/Sexilio*, ed. Patrick “Pato” Hebert, trans. Omar Baños in consultation with Adela Vasquez (Los Angeles: The Institute for Gay Men’s Health, 2004), 21. Cortez first interviewed Vasquez for Jose Marquez’s website *I5*. The Institute for Gay Men’s Health is a partnership between APLA in Los Angeles and Gay Men’s Health Crisis in New York. *Sexile* is available as a pdf file at [http://www.apla.org/news-and-multimedia/publications/documents/sexile\\_web.pdf](http://www.apla.org/news-and-multimedia/publications/documents/sexile_web.pdf). Accessed March 7th 2014. In the printed version of *Sexile*, the reader may read it first in English then turn it over to read it again in Spanish.

<sup>16</sup> Cortez, *Sexile*, 61.

<sup>17</sup> Patrick “Pato” Hebert, ‘Foreword,’ *Sexile*, iii.

<sup>18</sup> Cortez, ‘Introduction,’ *Sexile*, vii.



approaches to HIV-prevention, “in which hybridity is privileged over didactic binaries.”<sup>19</sup> “We must continually find or create middle ground in the bleed between competing modes of knowing,” they insist, “In many ways, this process is a microcosmic example of Latina/o cultural synthesis.”<sup>20</sup> Here Ayala and colleagues employ “bleeding” as a metaphor for the merging and reconciliation of disparate forms of knowledge production. Not only does this suggest the necessity for knowledge to flow freely, to extend beyond proscriptive boundaries, to diffuse, to engender and be engendered by discursive contamination, it also advances processes of knowing which directly tap into tropes of Latino/a world-making.<sup>21</sup> The comic book form becomes, in itself, a transcultural negotiation.

Although *Sexile* imbibes elements from a plethora of subcultural material, it is unique for its vibrant and affirming depiction of Latino LGBT experience(s). In addition, it adds to an important, and often neglected, archive of Latino/a comic book production. It follows in the path-breaking footsteps of Los Bros Hernandez’s *Love and Rockets* – one of the first comic books to appear in the alternative comics movement of the 1980s, a colourful depiction of a fictional Latino/a community which deploys magical realism and focuses upon a cast of sexually polymorphous characters – and Ivan Velez Jr’s *Tales of the Closet*, which explores the lives of queer Latino/a teens as they interact with everyday obstacles and oppressions, such as hustling and gay bashing, and highlights strategies for coalition-building as well as the rejection of mainstream gay culture, to name just two forays into this evolving literary genre.

Concurrently, *Sexile* flies in the face of nihilistic depictions of the AIDS epidemic; in this sense it distances itself from the early dissident U.S. AIDS zines (such as *Diseased Pariah News*, *Infected Faggot Perspectives*, *Nikita’s Boot*, and *Piss Elegant*) that often parodied comic book formats but which were nonetheless predominately produced by and for radical queer, white, male factions, often at the expense of other demographics.<sup>22</sup> It also counteracts demeaning portrayals of gay Latino characters and HIV/AIDS which had already appeared in more mainstream graphic novels by the close of the twentieth century.

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<sup>19</sup> Ayala et al., ‘Where There’s *Querer*,’ 154.

<sup>20</sup> Ayala et al., ‘Where There’s *Querer*,’ 154.

<sup>21</sup> Discussing the Milagros AIDS Project in East L.A. and the Calmecac collective in San Francisco, which experimented with traditional Latino/a healing practices, Lourdes Arguelles and Anne Rivero contend that these agencies employed the practice of *conocimiento*, an alternative form of knowing or becoming, which encouraged clients to “seek ancestor guidance and assistance with the illness.” See Arguelles and Rivero, ‘Working with Gay/Homosexual Latinos with HIV Disease,’ 159.

<sup>22</sup> This is not to say that the creators of *Sexile* are not loudly and proudly queer; indeed they focus almost solely upon prevention for gay communities, often relishing the fractiousness of queer interests in response to HIV/AIDS. With his customary humour Cortez writes: “I like this part of the HIV response spectrum. I like it because I want to learn of new strains of faggotry. I like it because I want to see queer male life strategies transmitted and reproduced with virulence. I want pathology reports, Miss Thing. I want to know we’re present even when undetectable.” See Cortez, ‘Introduction,’ *Corpus*, vol.1, xi.

For example, in 1988 the inordinately camp, Peruvian character Gregorio de la Vega, a.k.a. “Extraño,” translated as “The Stranger” (further entrenching the “foreignness” of Latinos in the U.S. imaginary) but known, more jovially, as “Auntie,” first appeared in the DC Comics series *Millennium*. He was first introduced as a member of “The Chosen,” later known as the “New Guardians,” a group of racially-diverse immortals recruited to “advance the human race.”<sup>23</sup> An eerie parody of Vasconcelos’s cosmic race, “The Chosen” come together between the pages to halt the progression of Anglo-American imperialism.

However, de la Vega is a troubling character, a clumsy jumble of lazy stereotypes. At a time when Latino characters were still a rarity in mainstream comics, and gay characters remained deeply closeted, de la Vega emerged as a disappointing icon and a depressing archetype. As Frederick Luis Aldama notes, he is presented as a “limp-wristed Latino who speaks in truncated half sentences, refers to his team members as ‘Honey,’ and is more concerned with color coordination than with using his superpower – illusionism – to fight Western imperialism.”<sup>24</sup> Perhaps the most disturbing factor is de la Vega’s fate. After being bitten by the supervillain Hemo-Goblin, a white supremacist “AIDS vampire” charged with the responsibility of infecting and destroying non-white groups, he contracts HIV and eventually dies.

In antithesis, *Sexile* is subtle and nuanced; it veers away from making facile judgements or barraging the reader with a moralistic agenda. It inquires. It does not preach. Intriguingly, although framed as an HIV-prevention comic it does not contain the words HIV or AIDS; rather, HIV/AIDS is obliquely cast against the background of one, quixotic life. As fires scorch Cuba in the wake of the Communist Revolution of 1958, Adela is born Jorge Antonio, the illegitimate child of a single mother. Adopted by grandparents and raised in an idyllic rural setting, Adela is fascinated with sex, having sex with other boys, inanimate objects, and animals, and dreams of becoming a woman. Erroneously labelled homosexual – “do NOT call me gay. I never had gay sex. Never will. I’m always the girl, he’s always the man. Even when I’m fucking him”<sup>25</sup> – and thus rendered ineligible for conscription, she becomes a teacher briefly, before being asked to resign because she refuses to stop wearing makeup. After experiencing both derision and brutality on account of her ambiguous gender identification *and* actively participating in the convivial, if

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<sup>23</sup> *Millennium*, written by Steve Englehart, illustrated by Joe Staton and Bruce D. Patterson, Vol. 1, Issue 1, 4.

<sup>24</sup> Frederick Luis Aldama, *Your Brain on Latino Comics: From Gus Arriola to Los Bros Hernandez* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 35.

<sup>25</sup> Cortez, *Sexile*, 9.

marginal, gay community of her local town, Vasquez leaves Cuba as part of the infamous Mariel boatlift of 1980. In the Foreword to *Sexile*, Pato Hebert notes:

Adela's story is intertwined with compelling meta histories, two that were front page news as the United States stumbled into the 1980's, and a third that unfolded with much less visibility [the Mariel boatlift, the start of the AIDS epidemic, and the rise of transgender organising]. *Sexile* is Adela's dance through these histories. Shortly after the Marielito refugees began arriving in Florida, small but significant numbers of desperately ill young gay men began to appear in New York and Los Angeles hospitals. These nearly simultaneous cultural waves had no causal connection, but their combined impact was staggering. Adela and thousands of other queer Cubanos struggled to reimagine themselves amidst the confusion of a horrifying new epidemic in a country that was, at best, ambivalent about their presence.<sup>26</sup>

*Sexile* strives to encapsulate the breadth and diversity of the momentous changes which shaped Latino/a lives in the early 80s. As this thesis argues, the rise of HIV/AIDS in the U.S. and the emergence of politically motivated Latino/a discourse and cultural production happened simultaneously, a fact rarely acknowledged; for Adela, being Latino in a country that "was, at best, ambivalent about [her] presence" directly impacted her ability to manoeuvre safe sex practices and outmanoeuvre the dangers of HIV infection. Cortez's depiction of this negotiation is subtle yet powerful, ostensibly contained within only one chapter of the comic, a chapter worthy of greater consideration.

Enjoying sexual freedoms outside Cuba – "a drug we didn't know how to take"<sup>27</sup> – Adela arrives in L.A. at the end of 1980, at the very beginning of the U.S. AIDS epidemic. There she meets Rolando Victoria: "He was the most bitchy, faggoty faggot ever. I adored her. He opened his home to me as a sponsor. Rolando was a nurse and had been a nurse in the United States for twenty one years. He was my alcoholic angel in America."<sup>28</sup> Playing on this analogy, extending it far beyond Tony Kushner's epic invocation, Cortez depicts Rolando as la Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre (Our Lady of Charity of El Cobre), a revered Catholic icon and patron saint of Cuba [Figure 23]. In traditional visual renderings, she appears as a light-skinned apparition wearing a long resplendent robe and flowing mantle, holding in her arms a male child, Jesus Christ, and a small crucifix, whilst cherubs hover above. Her head is adorned with a crown and encircled by a halo of stars. She is smiling benevolently. Beneath her the stormy sea crashes and careens, almost capsizing a small

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<sup>26</sup> Hebert, 'Foreword,' iv.

<sup>27</sup> Cortez, *Sexile*, 42.

<sup>28</sup> Cortez, *Sexile*, 45.

wooden boat holding three supplicating, racially-diverse men. Exploring the myth of la Virgen de la Caridad, María Elena Díaz states:

The story [...] is often linked in the island's social imaginary to ideas of the nation, creolization, syncretism, and all sorts of miraculous – and historical – interventions. Oral legend and popular visual iconography have it that the Virgin appeared to three fishermen in the Bay of Nipe: a black or mulatto [slave], an Indian, and a white. These fishermen represent the trinity of races constituting the Cuban nation.<sup>29</sup>

La Virgen de la Caridad becomes the protector of mestizaje in Cuba, albeit a mestizaje spawned from the enslavement of Africans, the servitude of native Indians, and the supremacism of white men.

However, Cortez appropriates this iconography and gives it an audacious twist. Rolando, his face lined and bespectacled, floats in a long white gown, a paisley mantle cascading from the crown of his curly-haired head, upon which a martini glass (complete with olive) is jauntily perched. Around his head a nimbus of ornate penises delicately sputter, whilst Adela, a miniscule male form, legs crossed coquettishly, rests upon his hand. Three men reside in the fishing boat, battling the storm below; but now the men represent gay archetypes: a muscular young dark-haired man, a black effeminate figure with hands clasped in prayer, and a blond man sporting a tank top and tight shorts that ride down revealingly. Around his person are penned Rolando's "six commandments of living in the U.S.A" as recounted by Adela:

- I: Stare not at the crotches of menfolk. It's bad manners.
- II: A good garage sale is a gift from heaven. Don't waste it.
- III. Always, always pay the rent on time.
- IV: In Cuba, we learned that giving head is lowly. This is not Cuba.
- V: Learn English. Yesterday.
- VI: You are forever crowned by the pain of exile. Get use to it, girl.<sup>30</sup>

Rolando is aggrandised as a nevertheless intensely human, fallible protector of queer men in America. The depiction of gay men battling the storm is portentous, simultaneously indexing the Mariel and Haitian boatlift, which overwhelmingly brought homosexual and dark-skinned men to the shores of the U.S., and the imminent threat of AIDS. However, by choosing to stage Rolando as la Virgen de la Caridad, Cortez is also injecting a sense of

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<sup>29</sup> María Elena Díaz, *The Virgin, the King, and the Royal Slaves of El Cobre: Negotiating Freedom in Colonial Cuba, 1670-1780* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 1.

<sup>30</sup> Cortez, *Sexile*, 45.

optimism, for as Díaz recounts, the construction of la Virgen is spawned from a story recounted by Captain Juan Moreno, in which the testimony of the young African slave caught at sea is privileged and revered: “in the case of the Virgin of El Cobre, slaves wrote themselves – and were allowed to write themselves – into a mainstream story, altering a genre from which they tended to be excluded regardless of their evangelization, creolization, and incorporation into the New World.”<sup>31</sup> As in the mythicisation of la Virgen, it is the routinely silenced, non-white, transgender, impoverished, Cuban emigrant, who now takes control of the narrative; she writes herself into the history of Cuban relocation and HIV/AIDS, two trajectories which are often contoured by “official” narratives that invariably sideline or squelch radically oppositional experiences and voices. Adela does not just speak for the interests of transgender people-of-colour, she speaks for and to an entire generation of gay men.

What is more, by placing a wide spectrum of gay men together, men of different races, gender positions, body types, yet linked by the abject danger of the surrounding storm – “in the same boat,” if you will – Cortez is, in an oblique fashion, staging an interconnected queer community, together in solidarity, intimately bound by the approaching AIDS epidemic. If the white man, the African slave, and the indigenous Indian of the Cuban myth symbolise the amalgamation of racial strains, a brand of Caribbean creolization which, to return to Glissant, indexes the mixture, the flow, and the sharing of bodily fluids, then the trio of gay men hint at a form of recalibrated exchange between bodies and across identity categories; they hint at a viral mestizaje, in which the movement of bodily fluids and the sharing of viruses and mutual suffering work to construct rhizomatic stems of affect, of community, of culture, and of history.

In a more personal fashion, Rolando saves Adela. Over the next two pages, Cortez depicts a scene laced with wit, humour, and searing poignancy. When Adela returns home having contracted her first sexually-transmitted disease, Rolando is furious. He drives to Cantina Plaza, a bar catering predominantly to Latino emigrants, to confront the perpetrator, Adela’s lover, a macho Latino stereotype, complete with moustache, sporting a partially open white shirt and crucifix pendant, reclining seductively to emphasise the bulge in his tight jeans. Administering a hard slap to the young man, Rolando levels a dire warning at Adela: “Queens. Young queens. They’re coming into the hospital sick. They get exotic cancers and infections and then they die. Horrible, painful deaths, *niña*. Their immune systems collapse and they die and we have no idea how to treat it or even what it

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<sup>31</sup> Díaz, *The Virgin, the King, and the Royal Slaves of El Cobre*, 97.

is.”<sup>32</sup> In the wake of this, Rolando instructs Adela to practice safe sex, a request which she reluctantly acquiesces to:

“But what if I want to get pregnant and start my own little family?”

“This is not a joke, *loca*! Ju promise right now – condoms every time you fuck.”

“(Sigh) Yes mother.”<sup>33</sup>

Over the page, juxtaposed against an illustration of a condom-clad erect penis, extending from a tuft of dark pubic hair, are penned the words:

It’s a total miracle that I obeyed and used condoms, because let me tell you straight up, I LOVE COCK. Just to say the word ‘cock’ makes my mouth feel full. ‘Cock’ is the only word as beautiful as ‘sista.’

Putting latex between me and good cock was a crazy ass idea to me, negative to me, not sexy to me. I had come to California and I wanted my sexual freedom and Rolando was telling me to use condoms???

That queen was the only person in all the world who could convince me to use a condom. I listened and it saved my life. No drama. Just the truth.<sup>34</sup>

*Sexile* is a vastly significant artefact chronicling queer Latino cultural production responding to HIV/AIDS in the twenty-first century. Though well received in universities, clinics, bars, clubs, and AIDS foundations throughout the U.S., it has thus far not generated much critical discourse.<sup>35</sup> One of the primary aims of this thesis is to regenerate, analyse, and archive underrepresented cultural production by gay Latinos responding to HIV/AIDS. The need for such restorative projects is imminent and reflects a vibrant and growing field of inquiry in Latino/a studies. Certainly the first two decades of the American AIDS epidemic have sparked a recent upsurge in scholarship addressed to this period. Currently New York based postgraduate Julian de Mayo is working on an important enterprise, ‘ACT UP New York: Unleashing Latino Power,’ archiving and exploring the impact of ACT UP’s Latino Caucus and the ambivalent and often inadequate inclusion of racial politics in the heavily white, middle class activist collective.<sup>36</sup> This comes as the ACT UP Oral

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<sup>32</sup> Cortez, *Sexile*, 47.

<sup>33</sup> Cortez, *Sexile*, 47.

<sup>34</sup> Cortez, *Sexile*, 48.

<sup>35</sup> For a rare discussion see Theresa M. Tensuan, ‘Crossing the Lines: Graphic (Life) Narratives and Co-Laborative Political Transformations,’ *Biography*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (Winter 2009), 173-189.

<sup>36</sup> For more information on ‘Unleashing Latino Power’ see <http://urt.parsons.edu/urt/research/project/act-up-new-york-unleashing-latino-power>; <http://urt.parsons.edu/urt/research/argument/making-media>; <http://latinos-en-actup.tumblr.com/>. Accessed 20<sup>th</sup> February 2014.

History Project has been compiled online by Sarah Schulman and Jim Hubbard, which contains several interviews with prominent Latino activists, such as Robert Vazquez-Pacheco, Moisés Agosto, Gonsalva Aburto, and Aldo Hernandez. This important archive of oral histories, paired with contemporary footage produced by ACT UP video activists, has already spawned two documentary films, *United in Anger* (2012) and the Academy Award nominated *How to Survive a Plague* (2012), both of which chart the early efforts of ACT UP/New York.

With this in mind, it is, I contend, an auspicious moment to delve deeper into the lives and cultural production of relatively obscure gay Latino AIDS activists.<sup>37</sup> Robert Garcia, who headed up the Latino Caucus until his death in 1993 and participated in the national organisation Men of All Colors Together, also founded the New York City-based video collective, House of Color. The short-lived collective (formed of lesbians, bisexuals, and gay men of colour) produced two videos, *I Object*, a short but frenzied assortment of images commenting on the suffocating hegemony of white markers of physical beauty and “white-washed” representations of racialised factions, and *Probe*, which juxtaposes experimental film and documentary-style interviews with queer people of colour. The Robert Garcia Papers (1988-1993), donated by artist Karen Ramsbacher and held at Cornell University, form an invaluable archive chronicling his role in ACT UP/New York and House of Color but have yet to draw any sustained scholarly attention.<sup>38</sup>

Similarly, queer Mexican-American artist and poet Ronnie Burk was a dedicated and outspoken activist. His involvement in the controversial San Francisco-based offshoot of ACT UP – which resulted in Burk being taken to court by the San Francisco AIDS Foundation – has gained some notoriety. Yet despite the fact that Burk’s poetry and visual art directly fed into his activism, and vice versa (certainly his surrealist collages were deeply scathing of HIV/AIDS medications and the exploitation of people living with

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<sup>37</sup> See Brett C. Stockdill, *Activism Against AIDS: At the Intersection of Sexuality, Race, Gender, and Class* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003). For a recent discussion of Latino AIDS activism on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border see Jesus Ramirez-Valles, *Compañeros: Latino Activists in the Face of AIDS* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2011).

<sup>38</sup> House of Color included Robert Garcia, Robert Mignott, Jeff Nunokawa, Pamela Sneed, Jocelyn Taylor, Julie Tolentino, and Wellington Love.

It is hinted in an interview between Moisés Agosto and Sarah Schulman for the ACT UP Oral History Project that Robert Garcia, whom Agosto worked with in the Latino Caucus, battled despondency. Schulman states: “people who we know – you’ve mentioned Robert Garcia, a lot of people that we knew – either did not get as informed about their drugs, or chose a non-pharmaceutical path. Many of those people died. Or they just decided to blitz out. I mean, I think Robert had a time like that, whatever.” Agosto replies: “I remember nobody knew exactly what we had to do. Example, with Robert Garcia, I never know why he – while for me, the whole treatment issue was so critical. For most of the other Latinos, I would say it was not.” Later he states, “The fact that I was born and raised in Puerto Rico gave me a sense of entitlement [whereas Latinos born in America] are growing up with being a minority, with a kind of fatalistic attitude. I don’t know if with Robert [...] that was the case.” Tape III, 35-36.

HIV/AIDS by drug companies and AIDS foundations alike), his role as a queer artist of colour, his membership of the Chicago Surrealist Group in the 1970s, and his patronage of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe in New York in the 1980s have been invariably sidelined. The art and activism of Ronnie Burk defied the uniformity of single-issue politics in the age of AIDS.<sup>39</sup> Latino/a ACT UP/New York activists such as filmmaker Ray Navarro and Iris de la Cruz, a member of PONY (Prostitutes of New York) who wrote several columns for *PWA Newslines*, the journal of the People With AIDS Coalition, such as 'Kool AIDS with Ice' and 'Iris with the Virus,' are also worthy of further analysis as a potential new direction in queer and Latino/a studies.<sup>40</sup>

This thesis brings together contemporaneous areas of discourse which are seldom analysed in conjunction, utilising blood-mixing as a framing device. Blood-mixing is, I have argued, a crucial process warranting detailed, careful analysis, because it indexes the way bodies were interacting and forging relatedness at the end of the twentieth century. In the 80s Chicana feminists gravitated towards blood-mixing as a corporeal action which cut across vectors of identity and the arbitrary boundaries imposed by conquest, to galvanise a collective consciousness impregnated with activist vigour and political agency. Blood was anointed with radical potential to transform concepts of late twentieth century identity precisely because it could not be contained in one place; it derives its significance from its ability to move, to flow, and to provoke moments of connection (often masquerading as contagion). The centrality of blood-mixing to the construction of Latino/a identity and fears over HIV transmission position it as a useful device for the analysis of gay Latino cultural production in this period.

In the present moment, the introduction of protease inhibitors has transformed blood-mixing yet again. The advent of new drug regimens has turned bloodstreams into repositories for the advancements of modern Western science. Along with renewed hope, ART has raised some ominous spectres: the realisation that personal adherence to HIV medication may segregate people with detectable viral loads from those with undetectable viral loads, the acknowledgment that tangible realities such as uneven access to wealth and

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<sup>39</sup> See Ronnie Burk *Basilisk* (1999) and *Sky\*Boat* (posthumously published in 2012). A selection of Burk's poetry, plus accounts of his involvement in AIDS activism and the court transcript of his court case with the San Francisco AIDS Foundation are reproduced in *Exquisite Corpse: A Journal of Life and Letters*, a daring and inclusive literary magazine founded and edited by Andrei Codrescu in 1983. See [www.corpse.org](http://www.corpse.org).

<sup>40</sup> Navarro died in 1990; de la Cruz died in 1991. Iris House, founded in 1992 in East Harlem, was the first U.S. HIV/AIDS agency set up to focus on services for women of colour. See [www.irishouse.org](http://www.irishouse.org). In 2001 Navarro's mother, Patricia Navarro, accepted the Spirit of Hope Award from Being Alive, Los Angeles. Extracts from her acceptance speech detailing anecdotal evidence of Navarro's life and activism are reproduced in the blog 'A Day Without an Artist: Ray Navarro,' written December 1<sup>st</sup> 2008. See <http://imoralist.blogspot.co.uk/2008/12/day-without-artist-ray-navarro.html>. Accessed March 10th 2014.



to health insurance, and intangible variables such as politics and globalisation may fundamentally alter the make-up of the blood. Meanwhile, the digital revolution has expanded (and retarded) the horizon of intimacy, radically transforming how people interact, communicate, and affiliate. In the past few years, identities contoured around HIV-infection have become susceptible to the fetishisation of HIV-suppressive drugs in the body: in chatrooms gay men proudly identify as “HIV-positive” yet “STI-free,” some voice their displeasure that their lovers are now “undetectable,” no longer “toxic.” I have argued in this thesis that HIV inside Latino bodies has simultaneously represented the insidious and celebrated acquisition of Western, capitalist culture, and the erotic and disturbing territorialising of whiteness in brown(ed) bodies. I have argued that HIV is a productive substance, utilised to construct ties of queer affect and reconstituted kinship across and within lines of race and culture. I have argued that HIV transmission has been presented as both a cessation and a continuation of mythicised mixed-blood resilience, stitched into the historical narratives of gay Latino communities across America. Therefore, how has the infusion of ART in the bloodstream, drugs that impede HIV’s targeting of host cells, drugs that inhibit the transcription of viral RNA to human DNA, preventing assimilation, drugs that neuter the fecundity of the virus, turned blood-mixing towards new configurations for the future? For gay Latinos negotiating HIV/AIDS after the protease moment, what does blood-mixing signify now?

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[www.eastofborneo.org/articles/your-art-disgusts-me-early-asco-1971-75](http://www.eastofborneo.org/articles/your-art-disgusts-me-early-asco-1971-75). Accessed February 25th 2014.

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Source: [www.actupny.org/diva/synAshes](http://www.actupny.org/diva/synAshes). Accessed February 25th 2014.

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Source: [www.joeyterrellartist.com/chicanismo](http://www.joeyterrellartist.com/chicanismo). Accessed February 25th 2014.

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Source: [www.williams.edu/feature-stories/feature-stories-archive/claiming-power-with-art](http://www.williams.edu/feature-stories/feature-stories-archive/claiming-power-with-art). Accessed February 25<sup>th</sup> 2014.

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*Jetter's Jinx*, October 3<sup>rd</sup> 1985. Live performance by Humberto Sandoval and Gronk at the Los Angeles Theatre Center. Photograph copyright of Harry Gamboa Jr.

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Source: [www.thewalllasmemorias.org](http://www.thewalllasmemorias.org).

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Source: Jaime Cortez, *Sexile/Sexilio*, ed. Patrick "Pato" Hebert, trans. Omar Baños in consultation with Adela Vasquez (Los Angeles: The Institute for Gay Men's Health, 2004), 45.

## Illustrations

Figure 1



Figure 2

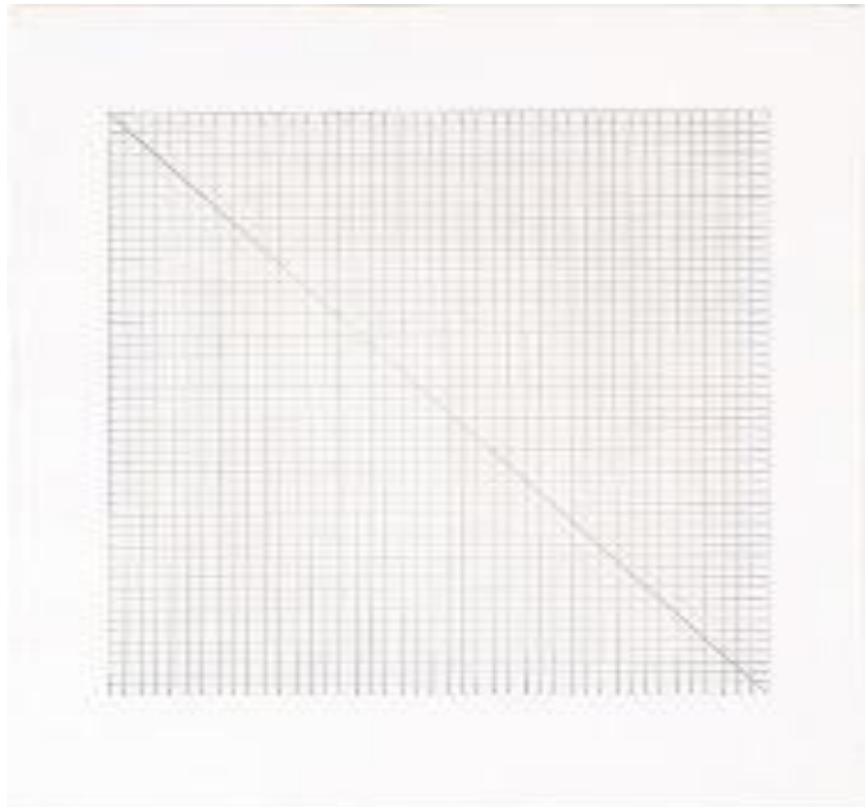


Figure 3



Figure 4

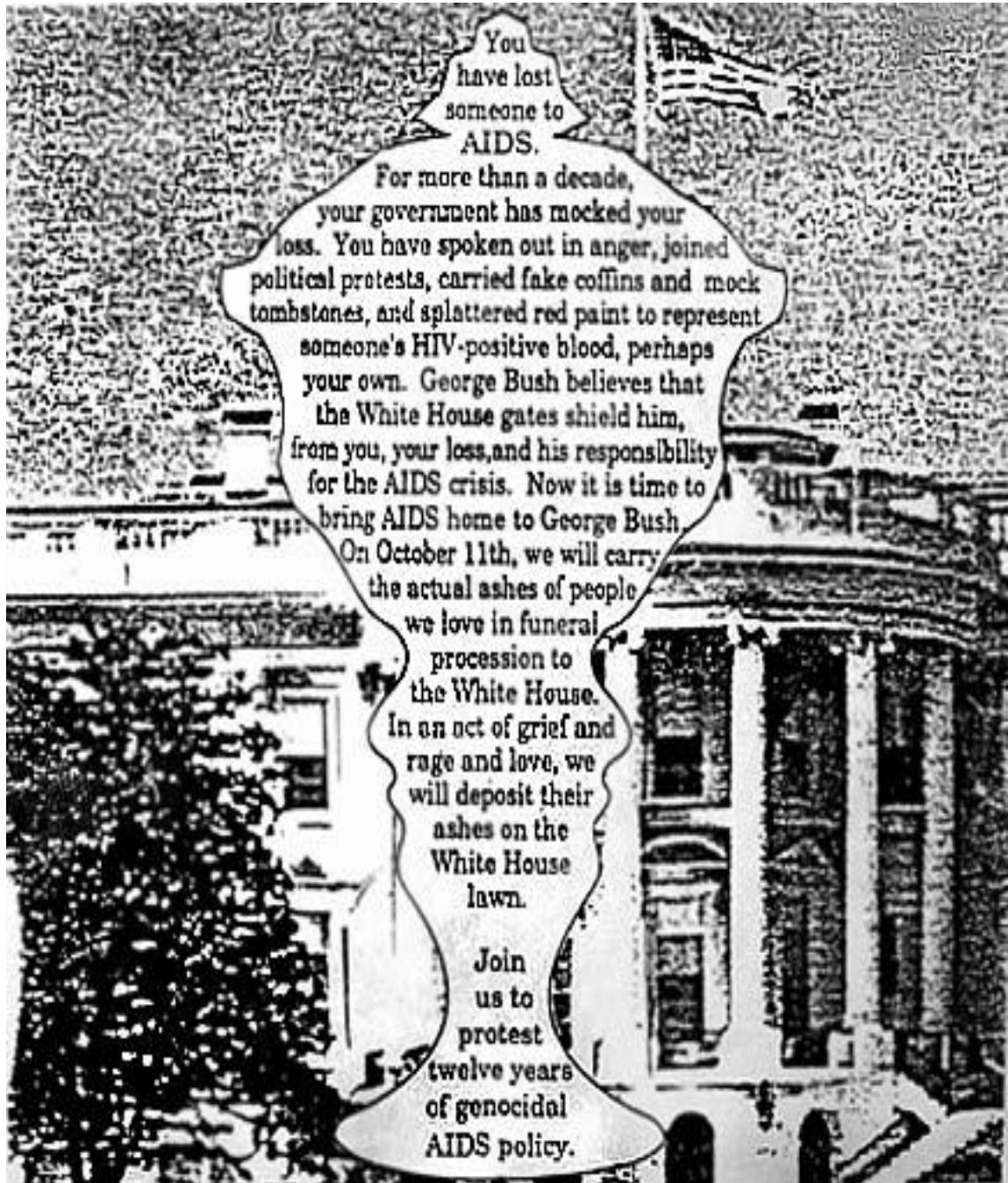


"Untitled", 1991

© Estate of Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery.  
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Figure 5



You  
have lost  
someone to  
AIDS.

For more than a decade,  
your government has mocked your  
loss. You have spoken out in anger, joined  
political protests, carried fake coffins and mock  
tombstones, and splattered red paint to represent  
someone's HIV-positive blood, perhaps  
your own. George Bush believes that  
the White House gates shield him,  
from you, your loss, and his responsibility  
for the AIDS crisis. Now it is time to  
bring AIDS home to George Bush.

On October 11th, we will carry  
the actual ashes of people  
we love in funeral  
procession to  
the White House.  
In an act of grief and  
rage and love, we  
will deposit their  
ashes on the  
White House  
lawn.

Join  
us to  
protest  
twelve years  
of genocidal  
AIDS policy.

Figure 6



Figure 7





Figure 8

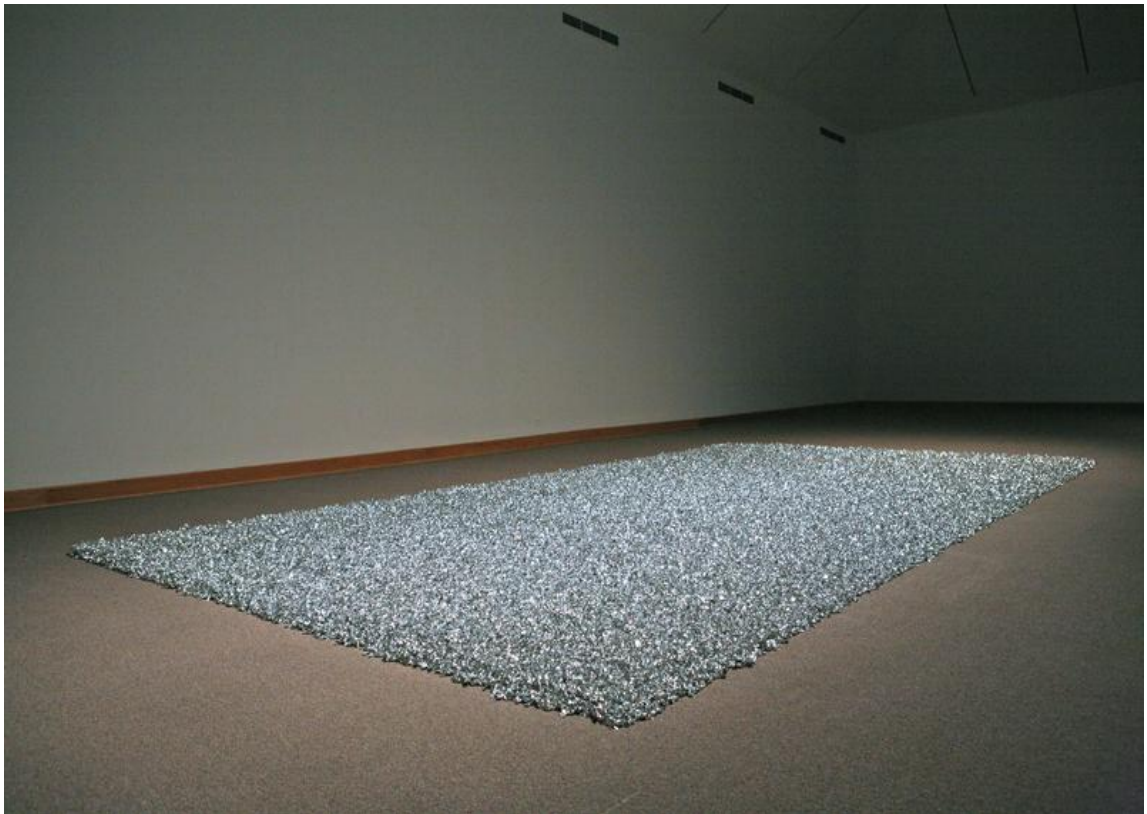


Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11





Figure 12



Figure 13

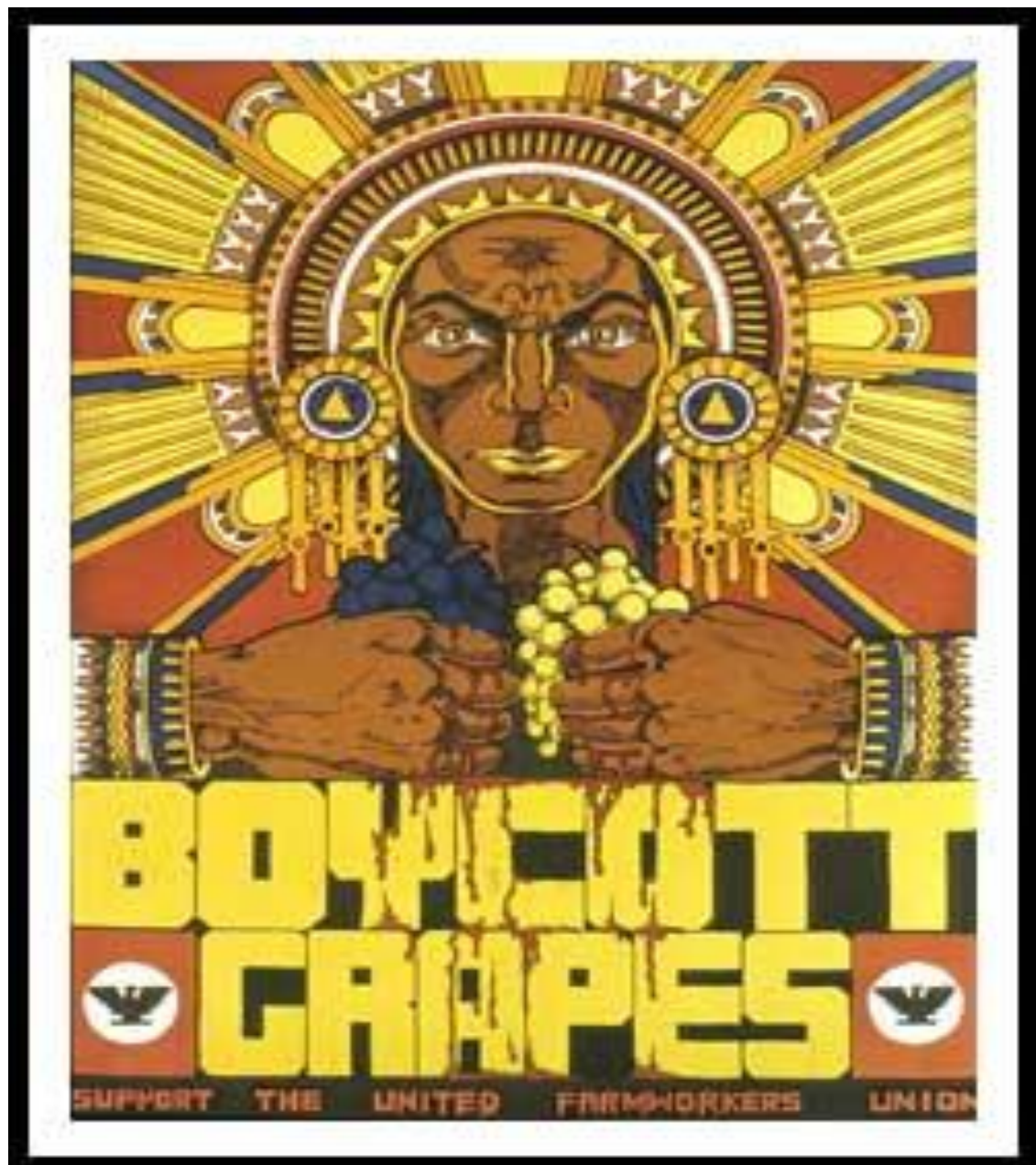




Figure 14

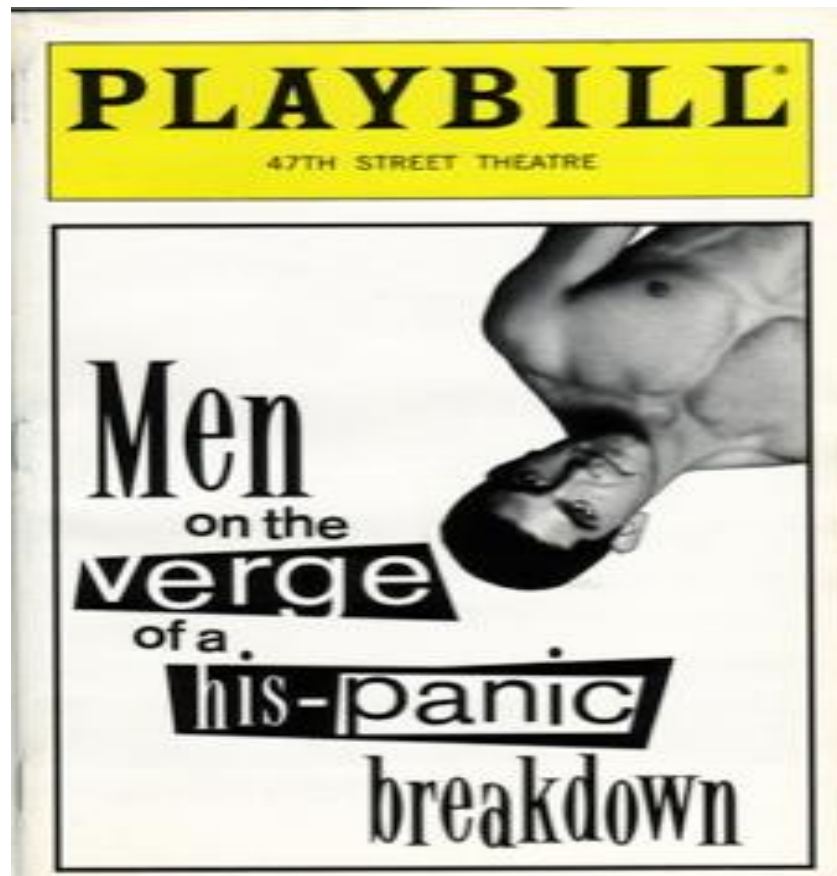


Figure 15

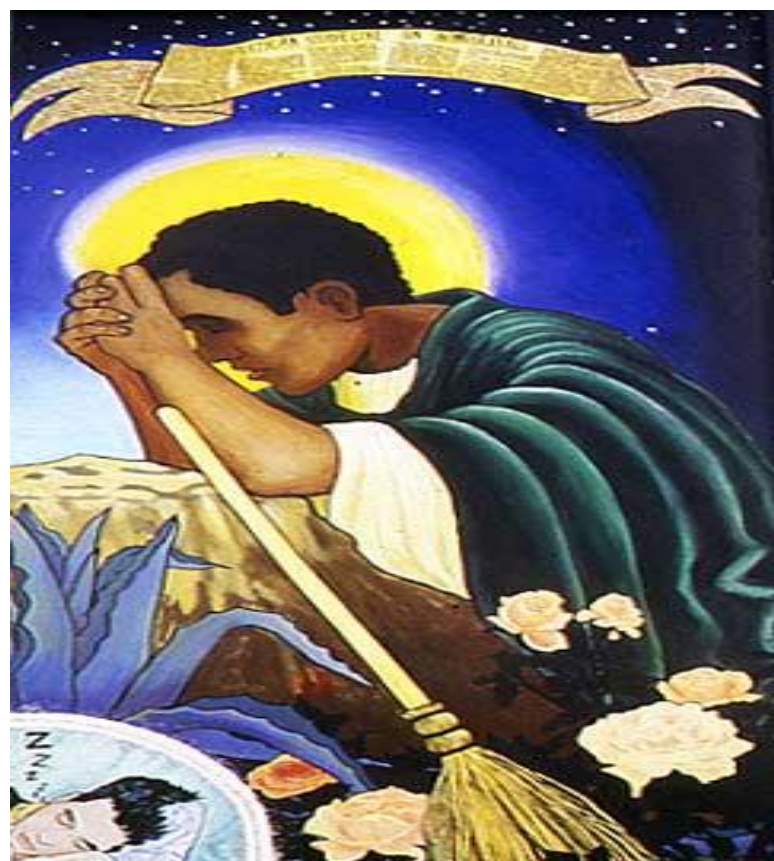


Figure 16

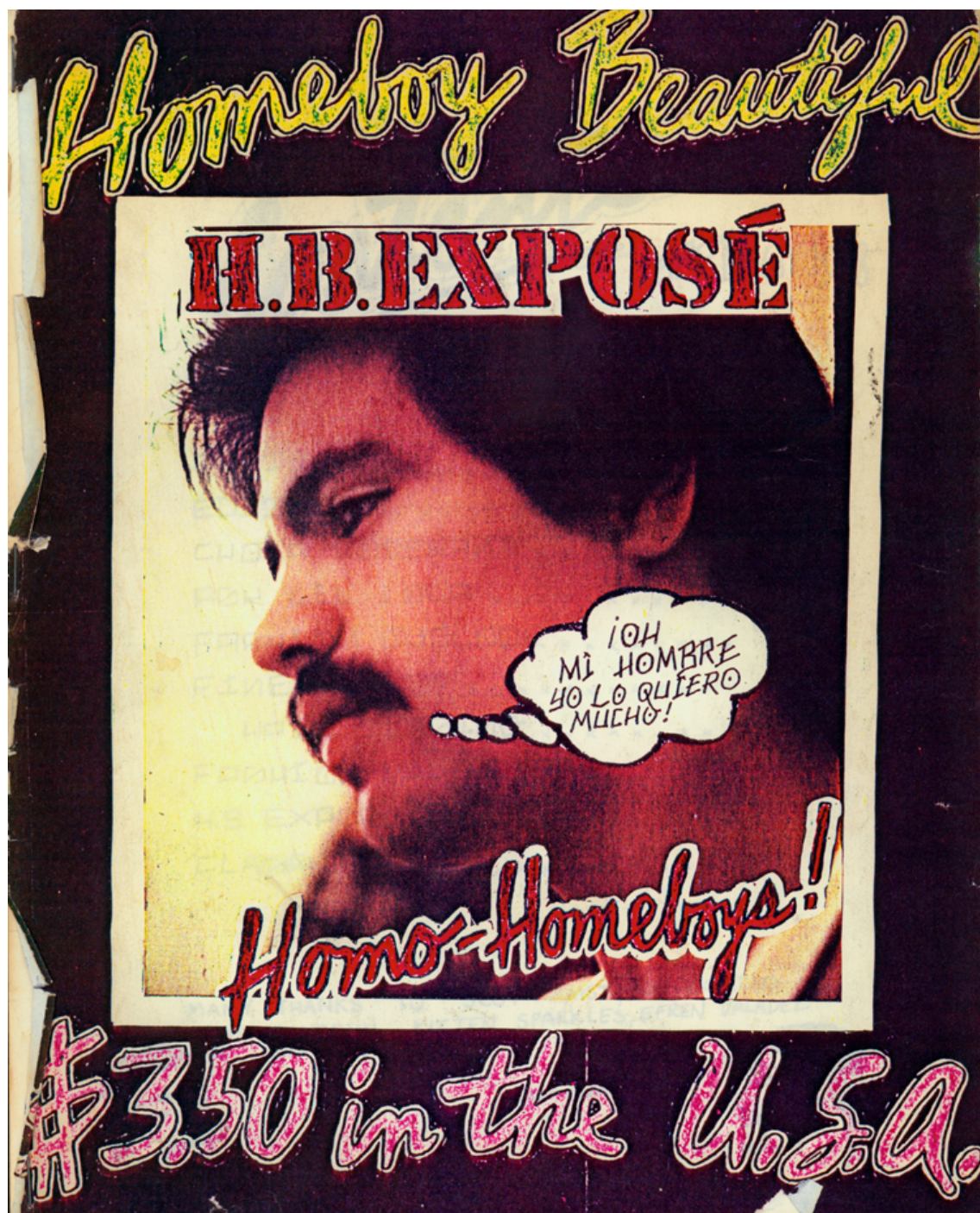




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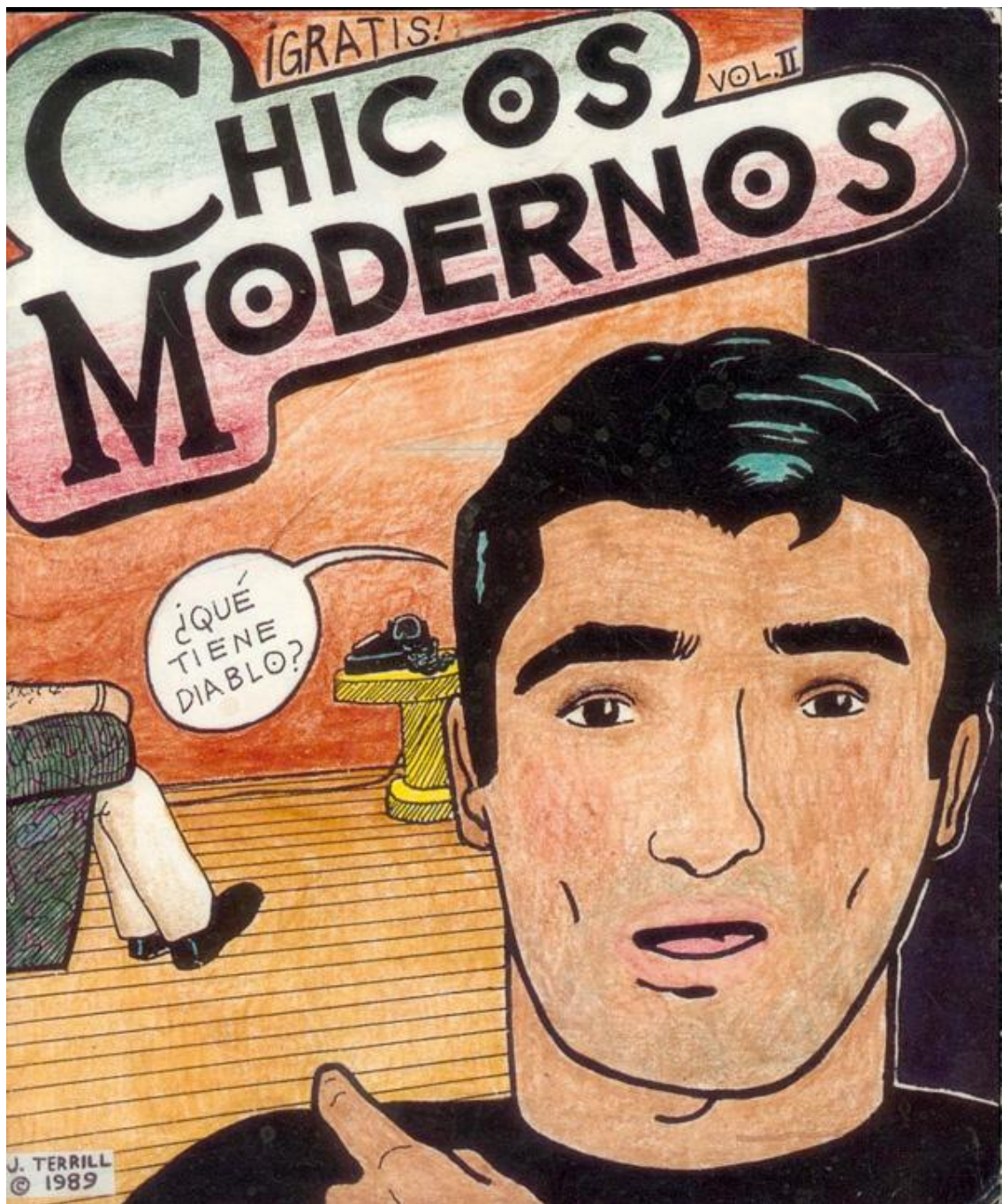


Figure 18



La Historia De Amor

Joey Terrill, 1994

**Apoya tus hermanos con VIH**  
**Support your brothers with HIV**



Figure 19



Figure 20



Figure 21

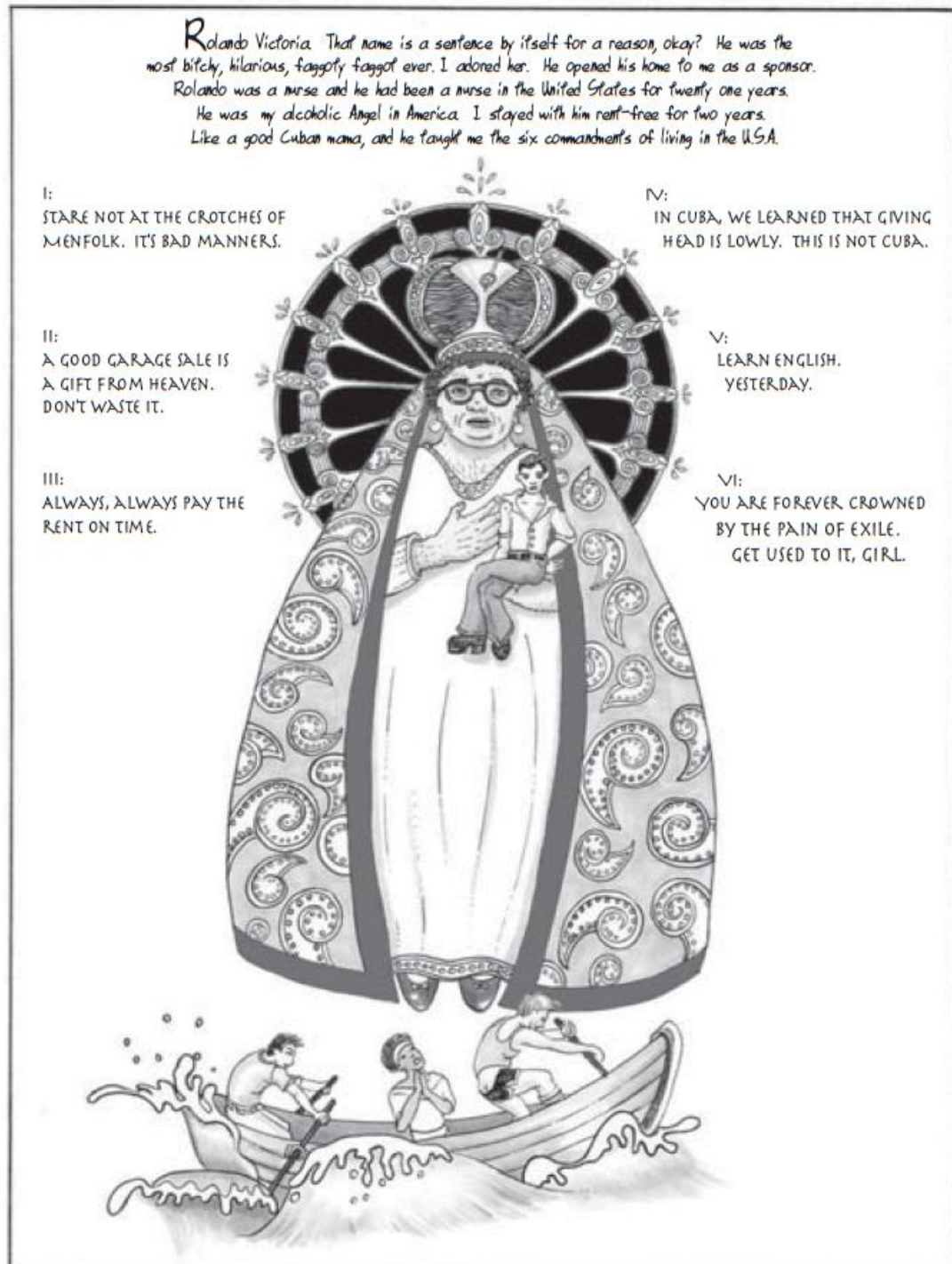


Figure 22





Figure 23



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